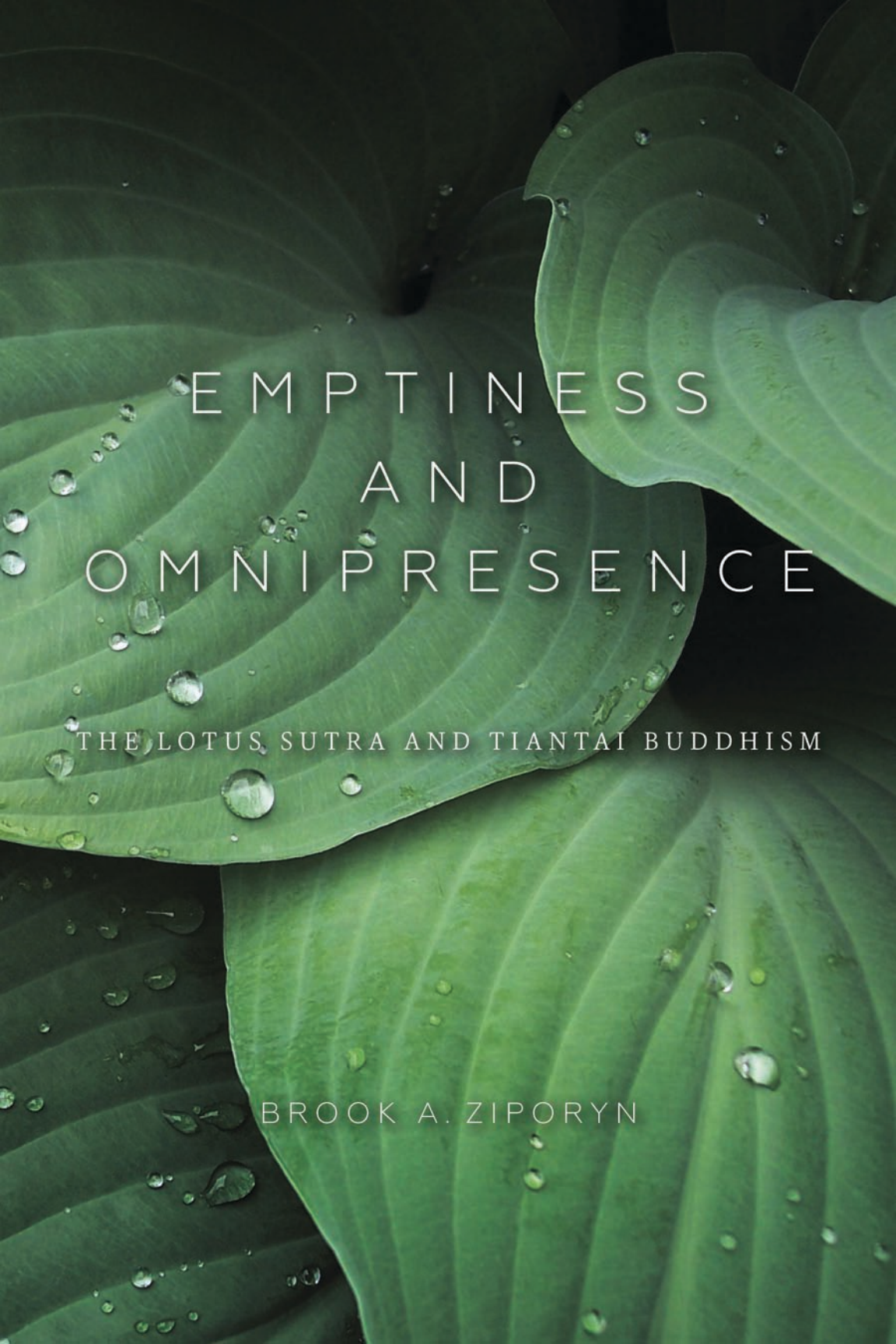
EMPTINESS
AND
OMNIPRESENCE
THE LOTUS SUTRA AND TIANTAI BUDDHISM
BROOK A. ZIPORYN

EMPTINESS AND OMNIPRESENCE

WORLD PHILOSOPHIES

Bret W. Davis, D. A. Masolo, and Alejandro Vallega, editors

EMPTINESS AND OMNIPRESENCE

AN ESSENTIAL INTRODUCTION TO TIANTAI BUDDHISM

BROOK A. ZIPORYN

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To the monster of the sea: dragon palace at full fathom five and green thunderbolts of will and wave and endlessly reflecting gazing abyss, all of the above and all of the below.

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PREFACE

CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHICAL CONSCIOUSNESS FINDS ITSELF in a disorienting situation. The dissolution of monolithic conceptual hegemonies that has occurred in the wake of intensified intercultural communication presents a new set of challenges, calling for a way forward that both respects and creatively develops the unwieldy diversity of seemingly incommensurate cultural systems that are now beginning to come into contact with one another. These unprecedented challenges, however, also provide unprecedented opportunities. Traditional Chinese Buddhist thought can make a claim for particularly close philosophical attention in this cultural situation in that it preserves for us the record of perhaps one of the only commensurate premodern examples of an analogous philosophical predicament. Chinese Buddhism emerged from the world-historical encounter between two deeply disparate cultural and philosophical traditions: the indigenous traditions of India (and, more generally, Indo-European cultures) and East Asian cultures.

The earliest attempt at a thoroughgoing Sinitic reworking of the Indian Buddhist tradition is found in the Tiantai school, founded in the fifth century CE, which through supreme intellectual effort forged a vocabulary with which to bring these two worlds of thought into creative dialogue, developing a synthesis that simultaneously satisfies their very dissimilar demands, thereby producing an entirely new vision of Buddhism and indeed of the human condition. In its full flowering, Tiantai creates the most rigorous theoretical edifice in all of East Asian intellectual history, using modes of argumentation and praxis that are derived squarely from Indian Buddhism but in the service of ideals and

metaphysical conclusions that are rooted deeply in the indigenous philosophical traditions. The result is a comprehensive system of thought that is utterly new, rarely understood, and, as it happens, still quite unique and unduplicated fifteen centuries later.

This book presents an interpretation of the ontology, metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics of Tiantai Buddhism, as rooted in that tradition's reappropriation of general Buddhist philosophical concepts of suffering, conditionality, nonself, desire, emptiness, inherent enlightenment, and Buddha-nature, and of the way those doctrines are seen by Tiantai tradition to have been radically reconfigured by the narrative innovations of the *Lotus Sūtra* (full Sanskrit name: *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*). The distinctive ideas developed in this school of thought have not yet received attention commensurate to their potential philosophical importance in English-language scholarship. Some of my own past works have attempted to redress this underrepresentation, but have done so by pursuing a textual-based cultural-historical approach to Tiantai internecine doctrinal disputes (*Evil and/or/as the Good: Omnicentrism, Intersubjectivity, and Value Paradox in Tiantai Buddhist Thought* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000]) and an experimental exploration of potential further applications of Tiantai ideas (*Being and Ambiguity: Philosophical Experiments with Tiantai Buddhism* [Chicago: Open Court, 2004]). These two previous works seem to have presented some difficulty to many readers, largely due to their level of detail and specificity, their rather close mirroring of the not very user-friendly commentarial forms of argumentation found in classical Tiantai works in Chinese, and the faithful reproduction of the deliberately counterintuitive and sometimes byzantine doctrinal formulations found in those traditional texts. The present work, in contrast, is meant to present the key Tiantai ideas and their antecedents in more direct and less mediated terms, in a way that will be comprehensible to educated contemporary philosophical readers of all backgrounds. The work spells out the steps of the arguments behind the basic premises of Buddhist thought and how these both underpin and are undermined by the revolutionary Mahāyāna concepts of Emptiness, Two Truths, *upāya*, bodhisattvahood, Buddha-nature, and inherent enlightenment. In language that is meant to be at once nontech-

nical and yet maximally lucid, dialectically rigorous and yet intuitively accessible, philosophically precise and yet implicatively expansive, the book is an attempt to reframe the distinctive insights of that tradition so as to bring out the radical resonances these ideas have for central issues of contemporary philosophical reflection and dialogue.

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MANY THANKS ARE DUE TO A LONG LIST OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE for one reason or another found themselves reading and commenting on various versions of this manuscript, in whole or in part, over the years: first of all to my students, who admittedly had no choice, but who consistently rose to the occasion, alerting me to crucial conceptual and rhetorical nodal points as much with their revelatory left-field perplexities as with their equally expansive left-turn applications; and also to devoted and attentive outside readers like Koichiro Yoshida, Priya Nelson, and Malcolm Pearce, and most recently my brother, Evan Ziporyn. Their responses and queries have brought immeasurably greater clarity and depth to both the contents and the presentation of the ideas of this work, both reining me in and goading me open. Thanks are also due to the Mellon Foundation for its generous support toward the completion of this project.

EMPTINESS AND OMNIPRESENCE

INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK PRESENTS CERTAIN IDEAS ABOUT SUFFERING AND liberation from suffering—about human well-being—developed in a distinctive tradition of Chinese Buddhism known as the Tiantai school. In particular, I draw from the philosophical ideas developed from the sixth to eleventh centuries by this school as expounded in the writings of its three most representative figures: Tiantai Zhiyi (538–597), Jingxi Zhanran (711–782), and Siming Zhili (960–1028). It should be noted at the outset that many people, even those who are used to the complexities of Buddhist thinking and its sometimes surprising paradoxes, tend to find Tiantai claims wildly perplexing, contradictory, even shocking. This is because the key ideas of Tiantai Buddhism seem at first to be wildly at odds not only with common sense but also with sanity, religion, ethical life—indeed, even with the goals and orientations of Buddhism itself.

Tiantai philosophy asserts emphatically that Buddhahood inherently includes every form of evil, that these evils can never be destroyed, and that they do not need to be destroyed ("The evil inherent in the Buddha-nature," "Buddhahood does not cut off evil"[1]). It tells us that each experience we have includes not only itself but also all other experiences of all other sentient beings at all times, as viewed in all possible ways ("*yiniansanqian* 一念三千, The Presence of All Three Thousand Aspects of Existence as Each Moment of Experience"[2]). So our joy also includes sorrow, our sorrow also includes joy; our evil includes good, our good includes evil; our delusion includes enlightenment, our enlightenment includes delusion. And yet these are not all melted into an undifferentiated oneness; on the contrary, we are told, "The more separated they

are, the more unified they are,"[3] and vice versa. Tiantai philosophy tells us that every fleeting moment of experience of any sentient being persists eternally through all time, pervades all space, and is experienced constantly by all other sentient beings. Each of these fleeting moments of our experience is itself the ultimate source from which all reality is constantly emerging and is also the goal toward which all beings strive. Tiantai philosophy tells us that all theories and viewpoints are true and yet *also* that all of them are false. It tells us that the complete practice of any doctrine, even that of a devil, is the complete practice of Buddhism and that the complete practice of Buddhism is the complete practice of devils. And it tells us that the best way to overcome our own suffering, delusion, and evil is to dwell more deeply within them, that dwelling within them is itself a way of being liberated from them, that the deeper we dwell in them, the freer of them we become.

These doctrines seem to be crazy paradoxes, flying in the face of the most basic and universal aim of all Buddhist thought and practice: purification of the mind and liberation from suffering. They are doctrines that have puzzled not only casual listeners but even many people with an extensive knowledge of Buddhism. As noted, many have found past academic attempts to elucidate these ideas, whether in a strictly Buddhological or a comparative philosophical context, prohibitively difficult and confusing. On the other hand, over the past years I have found that in the classroom more casual presentations of the same ideas, in a conversational tone and divested of both technical detail and philosophical baggage, have proved much less forbidding and more accessible. This book is an attempt to take the latter approach in print form, offering a clear and straightforward introduction to this way of thinking, in the hopes that its unique insights into Buddhist practice, and perhaps into the human condition, will become more readily available for further applications and mutations. My hope is that readers will be able to gain a firm understanding of the many intriguing twists and turns of basic Tiantai thinking; to come to share somewhat in the philosophical excitement of the ideas thereby generated; and perhaps, in the best-case scenario, to pursue a more thorough and detailed comprehension of them through direct study of the primary materials in the raw form of their original setting.

ONE

JUST HERE IS THE END OF SUFFERING

Letting Suffering Be in Early Buddhism

THE PARADOX OF SUFFERING

Buddhism begins and ends with the problem of suffering. More specifically, Buddhism begins with the Four Noble Truths. At first glance, the treatment of suffering in this teaching seems disappointingly simple, almost simplistic. The First Noble Truth tells us that all experiences necessarily involve suffering. The Second tells us why this is: suffering is caused by desire, or craving, and attachment to desire. The Third asserts that the end of this cause (desire), and hence of this effect (suffering), is attainable. The Fourth tells us how to go about attaining this end of desire and suffering.

Often this formula is understood in a very straightforward way: we suffer when things don't go the way we want them to. Suffering happens when we desire what is not the case. Usually when this happens, we try to make "what *is* the case" conform to our desire: we try to get what we want. In this interpretation the Buddha makes the surprise move of approaching the dissonance between desire and reality from the opposite side: instead of changing the reality, change your desire.

But this way of understanding the problem may strike many people as wildly unsatisfactory. For one thing, can we really change what we desire? Certainly not by simply deciding to desire something else or not to desire at all; our desire is not directly subject to our will. The traditional Buddhist answer, however, is that yes, our desires can be altered, and the Fourth Noble Truth outlines how this can be done: by following the Eightfold Path of wisdom, discipline, and meditation.[1] It is a question,

ultimately, of enlightened self-interest. This process involves coming to see clearly that all experience involves suffering and that our desire for certain experiences is based on a false belief—namely, that these desired experiences will actually save us from suffering. Our desire for something other than what is the case is based on a misconception. We come to see that it is unreasonable and not in our own interest to desire what is not the case. Once we see the desire and the desired thing as forms of suffering—once we actually perceive this suffering, suffer this suffering—we automatically no longer desire them, just as perceiving the pain of holding a red-hot ball of iron leads directly to a response: to feel that it hurts is to let go of it. We can change our desires by seeing things more clearly, by noticing what we had previously ignored.

Note, however, that this still means preserving and promoting our most basic desire: to avoid suffering. All of our endeavors are aimed at maximizing pleasure and minimizing suffering, in more or less complex or indirect ways. It's just that we sometimes do so in unskillful, self-defeating ways. But for any of our experiences to be any good to us—even the experience of the end of suffering—this desire to avoid suffering must remain in place. If we really "eliminate" all desire, there will be no desire present to receive, appreciate, and enjoy the end of suffering when we attain it. In that case the end of suffering will be in no way preferable to suffering, for what makes either one worth anything is simply that it gives us something we want.

This idea brings up a more searching problem in this understanding of the Four Noble Truths: isn't this "ending of desire" in order to end the suffering it entails kind of like cutting off your nose to spite your face? Or, more forcefully, a bit like cutting off your head to cure a headache? As Nietzsche said, we do not much admire a dentist who cures toothaches only by extracting the tooth entirely. This seems a crude, somewhat fanatical, almost violent way to solve a problem that requires a more nuanced solution. Do we really want to want nothing, to take no joy in things, to passively accept whatever happens and have no opinion about it at all, no will, no initiative, no desire?

Of course, this is a crude caricature of the Buddhist position. But it is one that sometimes lurks in the background of even relatively sophisticated presentations of Buddhist thought and practice. Even a perfunc-

tory experience of Buddhist practice, however, reveals that something is wrong with it, because the end of desire turns out to be a distinctly enjoyable experience in a way that is not easy to describe or analyze within the terms of experiences of joy that are connected with desire in the more ordinary sense. One finds, to one's surprise, that this acceptance of things exactly as they are is itself an experience that is intensely satisfying, as satisfying as if one had attained something one had been fervently desiring without realizing it. It leads one to reevaluate what one means by desire, what one means by enjoyment, by satisfaction, even what one means by experience.

To try to get at why this is so, we must note that the Four Noble Truths actually present a profound paradox. Look at the logic:

> It is by ending desire that suffering is ended.
>
> But desire, by definition, is the attempt to get away from some suffering. Desire is the desire to end suffering.
>
> Therefore: it is by eventually ending the desire to end suffering that suffering can be ended!

Put another way, suffering can only be ended by no longer trying to end suffering!

A little more emphatically, we can say that even if we must first employ the "pure" desire to end suffering as a motivator that gets us to practice the Buddhist path at first, in the end it is the *acceptance* of suffering, the recognition of suffering, the full realization of suffering that finally succeeds in ending suffering. What can this mean?

INERADICABLE EVIL: ENLIGHTENMENT AS TRANSFORMATIVE INCLUSION OF, RATHER THAN REPLACEMENT OF, EVIL

In this paradox we find the seeds of a unique doctrine advocated by only one school of thought in Buddhist history, the Chinese Tiantai school: the idea that even Buddhahood, the highest possible state of enlightenment and liberation, always and inherently includes suffering within it. Suffering is ineradicable, and enlightenment does not mean eliminating it or even reducing it, but in a certain sense just the opposite: fully accepting it as literally omnipresent, just as the First Noble Truth proclaims.

Even if we can, with some strain, begin to see the logic of this position already, it may be harder to swallow the corollary: evil is ineradicable, omnipresent, and an essential element of Buddhahood. In a way this should come as no surprise to students of Buddhism, because in Buddhist psychology and ethics, evil and suffering are inextricably linked. "Evil" in Buddhism is simply defined as unskillful action that leads to suffering, for oneself, for others, or for both. In its root Buddhist sense, evil means nothing more than whatever causes suffering. In the framework of the Buddhist doctrine of causality, deeds have consequences—either observable negative events that are said to be brought about, through unseen workings of karma, by unwholesome thoughts and deeds or, more directly observable and perhaps more relevant to our concerns here, by unpleasant psychological results that are concomitant to mental dispositions of greed, anger, and delusion. Suffering is the result of evil—that is, of unskillful action, of misconceived attempts to attain happiness and avoid suffering. Evil and suffering are two ends of the same process. Evil is the beginning of suffering; suffering is the end of evil. So if Buddhahood inherently includes suffering, it must in some sense inherently include evil as well. Tiantai Buddhism proclaims "the evil inherent in the Buddha-nature" as its most distinctive doctrine, the full comprehension of which, it is claimed, is alone able to open up a realization of the deepest truths of Buddhist thought, practice, and experience.

But this perhaps just makes the situation even stranger. Isn't Buddhism all about precisely *ending* desire and therefore ending suffering? Yes, in a certain sense. However, that is not the whole story, even at the beginning of the story, in the earliest form of Buddhism embodied in the Four Noble Truths.

The Middle Way between Active Control and Passive Subjection

The Buddha's revolutionary discovery about desire is traditionally presented as a "Middle Way" between two opposite extremes. The legend of the Buddha's life outlines these two extremes in a mythical, hyperbolic fashion. First, we are told, this young prince lived a life of complete satisfaction of every desire, without ever experiencing or even being aware of frustration. The encounter with the inevitability of suffering—

in the form of illness, old age, or death, which even the sheltered prince could not escape—is highlighted in contrast to this prior vacuum. Then, we are told, he left home in search of a solution, which took the form of complete renunciation of satisfaction, denial of desire, and extreme asceticism. These, then, are the two extremes in Tiantai Buddhism:

1. Indulgence and satisfaction of desire.
2. Rejection and suppression of desire.

The Buddha's enlightenment is the discovery of a third way, a Middle Way, that rejects both of these extremes. What else can one do with a desire other than try to satisfy it or try to destroy it?

Please note that these two extremes turn out to have something in common. Both are attempts to get rid of desire. To satisfy a desire is to get rid of the desire, to replace it with satisfaction. When the desire is satisfied, the desire as desire disappears. To deny a desire is also to get rid of it, to completely eliminate it; it is to be eradicated so that no feeling of desire remains. Neither extreme allows desires to simply be present as desires. It is this unsuspected allowing of desire that provides the key to the Middle Way.

Now we can begin to understand how the analysis of desire and suffering in the classical presentations of the Four Noble Truths is considerably more subtle than the simplistic advice amounting to "If you don't get what you desire, change your desire." Observe the standard wording of the Third Noble Truth: "And what, friends, is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering? It is the remainderless fading away and ceasing, the giving up, relinquishing, letting go and rejecting of that same craving."[2]

We see that this desire, characterized here as "craving," is indeed supposed to "fade away" and "cease." At this early stage in Buddhist thought, desire is apparently supposed to be brought to an end. But the process for doing so is explained in a puzzling way. The desire is to be "given up," "relinquished," one is to be "free from" it, "non-reliant" upon it. It is not the *desired object* (the "delight" or pleasure that one is desiring) that is to be "given up," but rather *the desire itself*. The problem is not attachment to what is desired, but attachment to desire. Evidently, we have been "reliant" not on the desired thing, but on the *desire to get*

the desired thing. We are relying on desire. What is being claimed is that if we become non-reliant upon desire, if we give it up, if we *let go of* desire, the desire will "cease."

This is odd, isn't it? Let's try getting a little more literal-minded about this. Usually when we let go of something, doing so doesn't make that thing cease or fade away; rather, it just allows the thing to fall to the ground, to fly off into space, to spin off on its own, to do what it would do without our interference. When we let go of it, it is no longer under our control. Our grasp had held it in place; when we let go, it falls or rises according to its own intrinsic tendency. We had been controlling it; when we let go of it, far from disappearing or ceasing to operate, it is now freed to be itself, beyond our control.

Is the Buddha counseling us to "let go" of desire in the sense of letting loose, letting our desire go wild, rather than trying to "control" our own desire? That seems contradictory with our common understanding of the seemingly quite "controlled" life of the early Buddhist monastic. In fact, the Buddha has had an insight here. Desire does not expand and grow when it is "let go"; rather, it withers and dies. He means that it is precisely by letting go of desire that desire ceases. That means that what was perpetuating the desire, what was keeping it from fading away, was the very act of holding on to it, trying to control it. Why is this so?

To let go of something is to let it be itself, to let it do what it does without our interference. What does "a desire" do when not interfered with? We might think the answer is "Try to fulfill itself." A desire is by nature a tendency toward its satisfaction; that is what it "wants," after all, and what it will do if left to itself. So says our common sense, and this is indeed true when the satisfaction of a particular desire is immediately available. If there is a glass of water on the table in front of me, what my "desire to quench my thirst" will do, "if left to itself," is to simply develop into the impulse to grasp the glass, the action of raising it to my lips, the drinking of the water, the satisfaction of the desire. Nothing is really "added" to the desire in this case; nothing is done to it or about it; I need have no second-order attitude toward it or even think about it or notice it at all.

But it is not these unproblematic desires that the Buddha was really talking about. Desires that are immediately adjacent to their immedi-

ate satisfaction, that can be indulged and satiated without the least obstruction, do not cause the kind of impacted existential trouble denoted by the Buddhist term "suffering"; they flow smoothly into the adjacent gratification without a hitch. The entire situation, what *is* at this moment, includes both the desire and its present, one-time-only satisfaction in just this way, joined together naturally as a single moment of experience. What the Buddha is talking about instead is any desire that, for whatever reason, is not part of such a direct and immediate flow into satisfaction.

When a desire is frustrated, we have another situation entirely. First, we imagine the immediate gratification on the basis of past experiences of this kind. The problem is a *holding over* of this merging of desire and satisfaction from another time, applied in this case when something similar to one part of that past total experience of desire-and-satisfaction —namely, the "desire" part—is present, but nothing similar to the other part, the "gratification," can be found. We do not notice that the desire is something in its own right, separable from the gratification; in fact, we tend to experience our desire not as a desire, but as the *desirability* of the desired state or object. The individual event, "Desire for X is going on here," bleeds over in our apprehension into "X is desirable." "To let desire be" means, literally, to let the desire *be*, to be something in its own right, to be fully present *as* the experience that it is.

But in fact a desire that is in the process of being gratified in a way that requires any *action* on our part—any imagining of scenarios, remembering of precedents, or scheming about instrumental means by which it is to be gratified—is not being "left alone." It is being connected to something in a controlled and determined way. And indeed, when a desire is satisfied, this is a way of actively *getting rid of* the desire as quickly as possible. The desire as desire is not being let be; it is being papered over, squashed, shunned, obliterated. A second state is being urgently juxtaposed to the experienced mental state of desire in a way that will radically impact and change that desire—namely, the state of satisfaction of the desire. It is being collapsed into a memory or fantasy of its immediate merging with its gratification. It is not being appreciated, apprehended, let be as just what it is, this particular state of experience, imagining its gratification but without direct access to it. That state is something that happens. That state is something that exists. And after

all, it is painful to desire something and not get it. A desire, considered in itself, is a psychophysical state with a particular tone, a tone of dissatisfaction and pain. It is hard to leave something like that, something painful, alone. One tries to do something to get rid of it. A desire, considered in itself, isolated from the prospect of its satisfaction, is a kind of suffering. It is "held on to" not in the sense of "trying to possess it," but in the sense of "trying to control it," trying to direct it in one particular direction in accordance with a second-order desire or attachment: the desire to get rid of the pain of desiring. More specifically, our attempt to make it go away is an attempt to control it. It is a kind of "holding on."

It is important to understand this: "attachment" does not mean only a desire to possess something, to keep it with oneself. The desire to make something go away is also a kind of attachment. On the simplest level, it is an attachment to the opposite state: to want, say, the pimple on my nose to go away is to be attached to the prospect of not having a pimple on my nose. In a deeper meaning I am attached to the pimple in the sense of having a fixed idea about what it is and whether it is a good thing or a bad thing: I have "fixed" the concept of pimple, taken hold of it, set down a definite conception of it, that I am insisting delivers to me the true nature of the pimple. This, too, is a kind of attachment. Further, I am seeking to *control* the pimple, to be the one in charge of where it goes, what it does, how it is, whether it is. This too is a form of attachment, in this case using the pimple as a prop for an attachment to my sense of myself as being in control of what I am and of what happens to me. I am attached to my own power to be the dictator controlling the fate of the pimple. The Buddhist term for this power of control is *self*.

Indeed, what we desire when we desire something or some state of being is not really that thing or state: what we desire is *the power to get that state or thing*. What we desire is control, to be the sole cause of what happens to us. What we desire is *selfhood*. This can be illustrated with the old Aesop's fable of King Midas. King Midas loved gold. Granted a wish, he wished that all he touched would turn to gold. You know the rest: his food became gold, his daughter became gold, and so on. This turned out not to be what he wanted at all. It was not gold he wanted. Rather, what he wanted was to be able to have gold whenever he wanted it, and to be able to get away from it, to get rid of it, whenever he wanted to.

He wanted the power to *have or not have* gold. He wanted to be the sole cause of his having gold or not having gold. If you desire right now to taste chocolate cake, imagine how you would feel if once you attained this desire, you could never stop tasting chocolate cake. That would be a nightmare; sooner or later you would perhaps gladly commit suicide to get rid of the flavor of chocolate cake. What we want is not what we want, but to get what we want when we want it. We want control. We want selfhood. To desire something is to project into the future a definite expectation. These definite expectations come from the past. We want something in the future to match something we had in the past. When we form a mental picture of something we want—chocolate cake, for example—we are remembering something we had in the past. We are hoping to get that feeling again. We are trying to *recover* a past moment. We are trying to repeat a past pleasure, to regain the past. We want to step outside of impermanence, outside of the flow of time and the "goneness" of the past, and show our control: we want selfhood.

Here we have reached the real crux of the matter. The Buddha discovered something about all of his experiences, about all experience per se, about the nature of having an experience. An experience is *conditioned*. That means that something else has to be true for this experience to happen. It cannot make itself happen. More important, to be "conditioned" in the Buddhist sense means to be "co-conditioned." This means that every experience is not only conditioned by "something else" but also that it requires *more than one* condition in order to happen. No single cause produces an effect; every effect results from *a combination* of causes and conditions. This simple principle is the essence of all Buddhist thought, from the humblest to the most abstruse. We can understand this logically in a fairly straightforward way. Assume that there is some single thing or state of affairs, X. Assume that X is the cause of the arising in experience of something else, called Y. If X alone were sufficient to bring about the arising of Y, then whenever there was X, there would also be Y. That would mean that all along, while X, the cause, existed, it was already producing Y. That would mean that there can never have been a beginning of X's causing of Y; X and Y would always happen together. In that case, Y would really just be a part of X, an aspect or feature of X. X would always be XY. In that case, X could not account

for the arising of Y at some particular time. There would be no possibility of X causing Y to arise at some time or place in particular.

Now please notice this about "experience." For something to be experienced, it has to begin. There has to be a difference between "Y not yet having happened" and "Y happening." I must, at the very least, pass from "not yet noticing Y" to "noticing Y," even if I think Y was happening before I noticed it. It is this noticing of something that makes it an experience. So for any experience, Y, to occur, there must be some beginning to its occurrence. There must be a contrast between its presence and its absence. We would not notice anything that was always happening—and in an important sense, such a thing could not be considered to actually "happen." It has to arise at a particular time. Now, we have just seen that for something to arise at a particular time means it cannot be unconditional. For Y to be "unconditional" means that no matter what conditions may obtain in any conceivable case, no matter what the time and the place, Y must be happening then and there. "Unconditional" is synonymous with "omnipresent and eternal." But we have just seen that in that case Y would not be an experience at all. Nor can the experience Y be caused by any single cause, X, acting alone. For in that case, Y would always be there whenever X was there; we would now have to explain the arising, not of Y from X, but of XY from something else, so we have just pushed our problem back one step rather than solving it.

We can see that nothing causes itself, and nothing is caused to arise in experience by only a single other cause. This means that all experience without exception, just to even *be* an "experience," arises through the combination of several diverse causes. This means also that none of them can go on forever: none can be unconditional, none can be omnipresent and eternal. All experienced events are conditional and impermanent.

It is for this reason that the Buddha declared that there is no "self." The word "self" is very slippery and is used in many ways, so to understand this famous Buddhist denial of self we first have to be clear what is being denied. The criterion of "self" is initially that it is supposed to be something *constant*, something that remains unchanged over time throughout all of our changing experience. We might say, "I was standing but now I am sitting; I was sad but now I am happy; I was a child but now I am an adult." Situations and experiences change, but this "I,"

something called "the self," is referred to in all of these statements as something that stays the same through all of these changes, somehow underlying them or connecting them. Sometimes people refer to their body as their self; when asked which person in a photo is "you," you might point to the picture of your own body to contrast it with the pictures of all the other bodies there: that one is me. The Buddha does not deny that your body exists and is uniquely identifiable. He denies that this should count as "self," because self is supposed to be something that remains constant and unchanged over time. That identifiable body didn't exist before my birth and will not exist after my death, so it is clearly not an *eternal* self; but even during my present lifetime, on a micro level, there is no moment when it is not changing. It is impermanent, and thus it cannot be considered my self.

Conversely, sometimes people refer to their *consciousness* as their "self"; not to all the contents or objects present of which they are conscious, since I am aware of many things that I don't consider "me": the table, the chair, the sky, the earth, other people, and so on. Instead, when people use the word "myself" in this way, they mean the *one who is aware* of all these things, or perhaps the small number of mental objects to which they alone are privy, which no one else sees: their private thoughts and their private point of view are what they mean by "me." The Buddha doesn't deny that this phenomenon of awareness exists, nor that some of its contents are limited in their range of access. He just denies that this should be properly called a "self," applying the same criterion of permanence: the contents of my mind are always changing, moment by moment.

As for the alleged perceiver of these contents, which might seem to be constant, the Buddha notes that it is unavailable to consciousness, cannot be pointed out or identified as having any particular contents, is a mere conceptual construct or inference. If someone claims that there is a self apart from the changing perceptions, feelings, and thoughts we experience, the Buddha asks us to imagine removing all of these changing experiences entirely: what then would this unchanging separate self be exactly, apart from those changing experiences? Could anyone still say or think, "This is me?" The constant subject of perception, the perceiver of our perceptions and the thinker of our thoughts, is never perceived and

never even conceived of as having any particular characteristics, as being an identifiable entity. The Buddha suggests that this allegedly unchanging possessor of perceptions and thoughts is inconceivable and unimaginable in isolation from the changing flow of perceptions and thoughts, and thus is itself only conceivable as involving change. As something that has no conceivable being in isolation from change, inseparable from change in its very being, the unchanging perceiving self is a mere abstraction, not a concretely existent unchanging entity as it claims to be. In fact, all experience requires change; nothing constant would even be experienced at all, since to experience any content requires contrast, and no self is conceivable apart from experience. So consciousness, as the stream of these constant changes of experience, is also not the self.[3]

Since nothing we experience is constant, why do we even have a notion of "self"—something that is supposed to be constant in our experience—to begin with? If we think about the origins of our notion of self, it seems plausible to assume that it has something to do with *what obeys our will*. An infant is aware of many things in the world, including sensations of his own body and mind. He begins to differentiate self from nonself in this total field of experience by noting that some things obey his will—his hands and feet, his voice and body—while others, like the sun and moon, his parents, the spoon on the table, do not obey his will except intermittently and always through the mediation of actions of his body or mind. Some things he controls directly and consistently: these come to be considered "self." Some things he controls only when other things cooperate in just the right way, and even then always only with the participation of the first class of things: these come to be considered "nonself."

We tend to think of our self, the constant experiencer of our changing experiences, as the "possessor" of our experience. But this association is very telling: after all, a possessor is not only what is constant; it is also the *owner* who has jurisdiction, who has control, over what is possessed. Do we control our experiences? Can we decide, unilaterally, what to experience? Constancy is tied, in the notion of self, to the notion of control. But control means simply what happens due to *a single cause*: if a single cause makes something happen, we say that single cause is the controller of that event. This is what is meant by a self: the owner, con-

troller, single cause of our being what we are and experiencing what we experience. What the infant identifies as his self is what seems to happen due to *a single* cause as opposed to what seems to require more than one cause. If something seems to happen due to only one cause—my thought "I want to move my hand" seems to be all that has to happen for my hand to then move—I consider that part of my self. The very idea of permanence is thus seen in Buddhism as connected to another criterion of self: unconditionality and, with it, control.

By "self" the Buddha really means an unconditional entity that is able to continue to exist as what it is solely on its own power, that has the power to be what it is without relying on any contribution from something other than itself. That is what guarantees that it is permanent: nothing can destroy it, because it is itself the sole guarantor of its own existence. What this means is that "permanent" and "unconditional" actually imply one another. A self is what remains unchanged because it is self-supporting, which means that it can act as the sole cause of what it is, including every change it undergoes. And it is this that the Buddha denies when he denies the self: there simply is no such single-cause controller of our being or experience, nothing with the power to remain just what it is and determine what it undergoes through its own sole agency. Our entire psychology is geared around the notion that there is, somewhere or other, some such entity; the Buddha says that in reality this is not the case. No self is found anywhere, nor could such an entity be part of any possible experience.

Here are the Buddha's words from the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, or "Discourse on the Characteristics of Nonself," in the Pali canon:

> Bhikkhus, form is nonself. For if, bhikkhus, form were self, this form would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of form: "Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus." But because form is nonself, form leads to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of form: "Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus."
>
> Feeling is nonself. . . . Perception is nonself. . . . Volitional formations are nonself. . . . Consciousness is nonself. For if, bhikkhus, consciousness were self, this consciousness would not lead to affliction, and it would be possible to have it of consciousness: "Let my consciousness be thus; let my consciousness not be thus." But because consciousness is nonself, consciousness leads to affliction, and it is not possible to have it of consciousness: "Let my consciousness be thus; let my consciousness not be thus."[4]

The Buddha lists all the elements of experienced reality: form (i.e., the physical body and all physical things in the world), feeling (pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral sensations), perception (apprehension of distinct classified objects in the world as arranged by association with labels and memories), volitional formations (including emotional responses and impulses), and consciousness (sense of oneself as a separate subject aware of distinct objects). All of these elements are "not-self." Why? Because they are subject to "dis-ease"—that is, to suffering. To be subject to suffering is to have things happen to them other than what they want to have happen to them, other than what follows from their own determinations. It means that none of these elements of experience can be made "thus" or "not thus," one way or another, by any *single cause*. Simply saying to the body, "Be taller!" does not make it taller. Other things have to happen as well. Simply saying to an unpleasant sensation, "Be a pleasant sensation!" does not make it pleasant. Other things have to happen as well to produce that result. Simply saying to my desires, "Don't desire this!" doesn't make the desire go away. In other words, it is because these things are not under the control of any single agent that they cannot be called "self." If any single cause could completely control what happens, that cause could at least obtain complete satisfaction. And that cause would then, by definition, be a self. But because all experiences arise from more than a single cause, there can be no single agent that ever attains full satisfaction, full freedom. Self means agency, being the sole cause of some effect. Self means control. And since no experience can arise by virtue of a single cause, there can be no such thing as a self.

Now, it may seem that this analysis is incomplete. After all, right now it seems that I can simply say to my body, "Lift your right hand!" and—lo and behold—up goes my right hand! Is that not a single cause producing a single effect? The Buddha's answer to this question is a resounding "No!" Here is where a crucial and distinctively Buddhist nuance comes into the analysis, because much more than my volition "raise right hand" goes into the actual effect of my right hand being raised. There must be other, different conditions *also present* for this volition to take effect. My volition must combine with these other conditions, which are not in its control to procure. For example, there must be oxygen in the room.

Without sufficient oxygen in the room, I may have the thought, "I'd like to raise my right hand," but the strength in my body will be insufficient: my hand stays still. If there is *no* oxygen in the room, I am unable to even conceive the volition "Raise right hand"! Even my volition, which seemed to be a sole controlling cause, is not in control of its own presence or absence: it too depends on other, prior causes for its existence. Whatever it seems to do on its own is actually accomplished by an immense network of contributing, cooperating causes, both those that are needed to create its willed effects and those that brought this volition into existence in the first place.

Why, then, do we think we are "selves"? It is because we normally do not notice all of those prior causes and conditions, such as oxygen in the room, that contribute to the seeming success of our sole agency and control, our ability to be the sole cause of what happens to us, our selfhood. It is because we are in the habit of neglecting so much of what is happening when we do something, or feel something, or think something. It is because our awareness is narrowed down to notice only the most glaringly altering condition—the sudden appearance of this volition or desire—that acts as the turning point or the straw that breaks the camel's back. We see a straw drop onto the camel—our desire to move our arm—and notice that the camel's back then, "as a result," breaks: the arm moves. We do not notice the enormous pile of other straws that was there already, that also contributed to the breaking of the camel's back. Hence we think this straw has the power to break camel backs. *We think we are a self due to the narrowness and crudity of our awareness.*

Now we can understand what the "Middle Way" between indulgence and repression of desire is. It is *awareness of desire*. A desire is a psychophysical state. It is an experience. All experiences are necessarily, by definition, conditioned existences. As such, they have three necessary characteristics, summarized in what is known in some Buddhist traditions as "The Three Marks of the Dharma":

1. *All conditioned things are impermanent.*

If a thing has any conditions that are necessary for its existence, it will be absent when those conditions are not present. But whatever exists only in certain times or places has conditions and is not unconditional: its existence is conditioned by it being a certain time and a certain place

rather than others—that is, it only exists "on the condition" that it is here rather than there, now rather than then. Hence to be conditioned is to be finite, to be limited to only certain times and places; whatever is conditioned is therefore impermanent, unless the condition for its existence also happens to be omnipresent and eternal. But that can never be the case for a conditioned thing, since in reality to be a conditioned thing is always to be conditioned by *more than one* condition. For if only one condition is necessary for a given thing's existence, the condition and that conditioned thing should properly be considered two parts of a single entity, for at any time or place when the one is found, the other is also found, and that is the sole criterion for what counts as aspects of a single thing; they are not genuinely ontologically separable. In that case, the conditioned thing arises when the condition arises, and we must now ask how this total entity, the condition itself along with the constant property that is conditioned by it, arises. If from one condition, then, these are all again aspects of a single entity, and so on ad infinitum. So if something were conditioned solely by the unconditional, it would itself be part of the unconditional, and hence it would not really be a conditioned thing at all. Conditioned things are by nature impermanent, because they are the product of multiple heterogeneous conditions, each going its own way, each with its own agenda. If my being alive depends on oxygen, I will exist only as long as oxygen exists. But not all times and places have oxygen. Further, if a body—call it water—is made of both hydrogen and oxygen, it requires that these two be joined in just the right way. But oxygen has its own properties, and hydrogen has its own properties, which is why we identify them as two separate elements to begin with. They do not always occur together; in some times and places they separate, do different things, go different ways. Compounded things are inherently unstable. To be permanent, a thing would have to be unconditional.

2. *All conditioned things are suffering.*

In its strongest form, this is given not as "all experiences *involve* suffering," but the much more radical "all experiences *are* suffering." "When something arises, it is only suffering that arises. When something perishes, it is only suffering that perishes." The point here is that the quality of arising and perishing as such is the hallmark of suffering.

Whatever arises is, as arising, ipso facto conditional, because whatever is conditional is not the product of any single cause. In other words, it cannot satisfy the agenda of any single cause. Hence it must be suffering to every single cause that is involved in its arising, for it can fully satisfy none. Whatever is affected by it, whatever experiences it is one of the causes contributing to its arising as an experience. To be an experience is to be the co-product of an experiencing apparatus and some events in the world. So if it fails to satisfy any of its causes, it fails to satisfy any of the contributors to its presence; an experience, as conditional and impermanent, is by nature suffering to anyone who experiences it. If there is anything about this experience that is not suffering, it would have to have something present within it that is not arising or perishing and thus is not some single identifiable experience in the sense we normally understand it. I am tasting ice cream, which is a pleasant experience; but to experience it at all, it has to sometimes not be part of my experience. That means this experience is not caused simply by me being me, but requires the cooperation of something outside of me for its occurrence. That means that the arising of this pleasure never arises for anyone who doesn't also lack it at times. My will to taste ice cream, which one of several necessary conditions for my pleasurable experience of ice cream, can only experience this pleasure if it is intrinsically not capable of always having it; the experience of the pleasure is thus a manifestation of the limited strength and failure of self-determination of my will; the pleasant experience is really also an experience of my will's inability to be a single cause, to self-determine. But a will that cannot determine what it experiences is a will that cannot always succeed in experiencing what it wants to experience, and not to experience what I want to experience is precisely suffering.

3. *All elements of experience (conditioned or unconditioned, if there are any) are nonself.*

Please note that this is said not only of "conditioned things," like the previous two claims concerning impermanence and suffering, but of all "dharmas"—all elements of experience, without exception. The unconditioned dharma is Nirvana, the end of suffering that is indicated in the Third Noble Truth. Both suffering and the end of suffering are nonself. In other words, the suffering of impermanent things is not ended, as our

original efforts tried to do in one way or another, by finding something that has a self—that is, something that has absolute control: our ego, a god, a universal controller of the world that we can attach to and worship. Rather, the end of suffering is attained by going in just the opposite direction, by going *more fully* into the very characteristic of nonself that caused our suffering in the first place: by fully accepting and fully realizing the character of nonself.

What all conditioned existences do, when left alone, is fade away. They are all *impermanent*. That is their nature. So when a desire is "let go of," when it is released from our control, when it is liberated into free fall, what it does is *fade away*. It mutates through time. It frays, it unravels, it continues to change, like all impermanent things. Finally it fades out and ceases. It is our "holding on to" that replenishes, feeds, perpetuates, and renews our desires. This is true whether we are holding on in the "indulge" form or the "suppress" form. It is *by trying to eliminate our desires, whether by suppressing them or satisfying them, that we perpetuate them!* When we satisfy a desire, we are "attaching" to it as a tool in the hands of our controlling self; we are directing this conditional event, a desire, to an end that we control, the procuring of the desired thing. When we suppress a desire, we are "attaching" to it as an obstacle in the way of our controlling self: we are determining what we should be—that is, free of this desire—and freely eliminating the desire and reaching the state of desirelessness. In both cases we are trying to *do* something to it or with it or about it. In both cases we are reinforcing the obtuseness of attention and awareness that undergirds our sense of being a sole cause of what happens to us, a controller, a self.

Awareness of the desire as a desire is the only way to "let go" of a desire. Awareness of a desire is a letting-be of the desire, letting it be what it is, allowing it to manifest its full nature completely. Its full nature is to be a conditional event. To be aware of the desire as a conditional event is to see it as dependent on causes—our sense organs, our contact with certain sense data, our sensations of pleasure, our past associations. We simply let it be what it is and do what it does. What our desire does is arise conditionally and perish conditionally. The more we let it do that, the more we allow it to be what it is, the more we are aware of it. We are not trying to make it do anything other than what it wants to do. We

are not trying to control it. We are not trying to superimpose anything else on it. We are not trying to do anything with it or to it or about it.

Please note that this awareness is not only a Middle Way between suppression and indulgence; it is also a Middle Way between active and passive. It may seem that the realization that we are never in total control of what happens to us would imply that we give up trying to be an active agent and instead become completely passive, putting ourselves entirely in the hands of all of these causes that we can't control. But it is not just ourselves that cannot be a sole controlling cause. Nothing else can do so either. No "one" is in control of what happens to us: not ourselves, not God, not the Buddha, not society, not even some single entity that we would call "nature." We are not separate from nature, or causality, or conditions; rather, we are composed of them. This means they cannot be "outside" of us, pushing "us" around, for there is no other us to be pushed around by them. When we let things be, we are also letting the elements that we formerly identified as ourselves be. When we let things do what they do, we are also letting "ourselves" do what they do: arise and perish, change, desire, suffer as a conditional being. When we are aware of all our experiences as conditional events, produced by multiple causes, impermanent and painful, we are neither active nor passive. "Awareness" is the name for this state of neither activity nor passivity. It is not passive, for it is a honing of sensitivity of our faculties, allowing our attention and our senses to register more sensitively, to do more, to feel more. We are presented with many options of what to "do": endeavor to become this kind of person or that, to make available to ourselves this object or experience or that (i.e., to indulge a desire to be or to have). But all of these, as desires for control of one kind or another, reinforce our constantly refuted and thus pain-creating illusion that we are a singlehandedly efficient cause, a self.

Alternately, we can choose to control and suppress these desires, to refrain from all "doing." But this, too, as an attempt at single-cause control, only amounts to another form of "doing." It would seem that there is no way out: there is nothing we can do to overcome the vicious circle of "doing." Even "not-doing" is another form of "doing." So neither doing nor not-doing can solve our problem. What we need is a Middle Way: something that is simultaneously doing and not-doing. The only

thing we can endeavor to do that turns out to equally be a not-doing is to endeavor to enhance our own "passive" awareness of all the multiple causes that make up our desire to do and our illusion that we can singlehandedly do so. This is the awareness that is cultivated in Buddhist mindfulness and insight meditation. It is an accomplishment of sorts to be able to go against the grain of one's habits of doing and not-doing, to *actively let* things act upon one. It is a kind of active passivity, or passive activity. To allow each thing one encounters to fully be itself, to manifest itself fully in one's awareness, is a *power* that one cultivates and masters: it is not imposed upon us, for the more attentively and fully we are able to allow these elements of experience to manifest, the more they can do in us, the more we are doing. So this awareness is not passive. But it is not active either, for it is an allowing of all things to be exactly what they are, moving them neither to the right nor to the left. It is an inviting of all things to be fully what they are and to feel more fully what all things are.

Awareness allows us to be more and do more by allowing all things to be and do more fully what they are being and doing. It is neither active nor passive, neither controlling things nor being controlled by them. It is the Middle Way. And it is here that we can trace the seeds of the Tiantai conception of overcoming our evil and suffering through the fuller realization of our evil and suffering: greater awareness, a more robust presence in our experience, is at once an overcoming and a full allowing. It is only when evil and suffering are experienced as occurring everywhere and at all times that they are fully and eternally overcome.

To get a better grasp of all this, we need to consider the other key premises behind Tiantai thinking. These can be found in the notions of Emptiness and the Twofold and Threefold Truth, on the one hand, and the idea of *upāya*, or skillful means, in the distinctive way it is presented in the *Lotus Sūtra*. We will take up these ideas in the next two chapters.

TWO

RAFTS AND ARROWS

The Two Truths in Pre-Tiantai Buddhism

DOES THE END OF SUFFERING BEGIN?

In basic Buddhism, as recorded in the earliest texts, the practice of awareness of desire as desire leads to the "cessation" of desire. This is meant, it seems, quite literally. Letting go of the sense of self, you also let go of your desire, cease to "invest" in it. This is a way of letting the desire be more fully what it is, an impermanent factor in a multi-conditional process. The result is like unplugging an electric fan: the source of power that was perpetuating its activity has been removed. The fan does not stop immediately; it continues to spin on its remaining momentum. But it begins to wind down in the absence of the nourishment that usually "feeds" it. Finally, if we can refrain from "plugging it back in"—attaching to our desire—the desire fades away and ceases. With the ending of desire, its effect, suffering, ceases to arise. This is Nirvana.

But a strange problem comes up here. We saw that any state or experience that begins at a particular time is by definition conditioned. Whatever is conditioned, however, is necessarily a form of suffering. Nirvana, on the other hand, is supposed to be unconditioned and the end of suffering. As such, it does not make sense for it to begin at a certain moment in time. It has to be omnipresent and eternal.

This is perhaps why the Buddha is so skittish and evasive in descriptions of Nirvana in our earliest Buddhist texts. He does not give it any positive description. He merely says it is an end of suffering and the mental conditions that lead to suffering, which is neither being nor nonbeing, nor both, nor neither—yet another Middle Way. Any description

would falsify it, so the idea of "entering" Nirvana at a particular moment in time must be regarded as something intended only as a guide for practice, as a way to reach what Nirvana means *pragmatically* for a suffering living being: the end of suffering, effected by the end of greed, anger, and delusion.

THE ARROW AND THE RAFT

This doesn't really solve the problem of how an unconditioned state can possibly begin at some particular moment for some particular being rather than, by definition, always happening in all places and for all beings. But from the early Buddhist point of view, it isn't really meant to and doesn't really need to. To understand this, we must understand the unique Buddhist attitude toward truth.

There are two parables in the Pali canon, the record of the Buddha's basic teaching used by Theravāda Buddhists, that encapsulate this distinctive approach to what information verbal teachings and propositions, including those made by the Buddha, can and should convey. One is known as the Parable of the Arrow. It goes like this:

On one occasion the Blessed One was living at Savatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anathapindika's Park. Then, while the venerable Mālunkyāputta was alone in meditation, the following thought arose in his mind:

"These speculative views have been undeclared by the Blessed One, set aside and rejected by him, namely: 'the world is eternal' and 'the world is not eternal'; 'the world is finite' and 'the world is infinite'; 'the soul is the same as the body' and 'the soul is one thing and the body another'; and 'after death a Tathāgata [i.e., a Buddha] exists' and 'after death a Tathāgata does not exist'; and 'after death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist' and 'after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist.' The Blessed One does not declare these to me, and I do not approve of and accept the fact that he does not declare these to me, so I shall go to the Blessed One and ask him the meaning of this. If he declares to me either 'the world is eternal' or 'the world is not eternal' . . . or 'after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,' then I will lead the holy life under him; if he does not declare these to me, then I will abandon the training and return to the low life."

Then, when it was evening, the venerable Mālunkyāputta rose from meditation and went to the Blessed One. After paying homage to him, he sat down at one side and told him:

"Here, venerable sir, while I was alone in meditation, the following thought arose in my mind: 'These speculative views have been undeclared by the Blessed One. . . . If he does not declare these to me, then I will abandon the training and return to the low life. If the Blessed One knows "the world is eternal," let the Blessed One declare to me "the world is eternal"; if the Blessed One knows "the world is not eternal," let the Blessed One declare to me "the world is not eternal." If the Blessed One does not know either "the world is eternal" or "the world is not eternal," then it is straightforward for one who does not know and does not see to say: "I do not know, I do not see."

'If the Blessed One knows "the world is finite" . . . "the world is infinite" . . . "the soul is the same as the body" . . . "the soul is one thing and the body another" . . . "after death a Tathāgata exists" . . . "after death a Tathāgata does not exist" . . . If the Blessed One knows "after death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist," let the Blessed One declare that to me; if the Blessed One knows "after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist," let the Blessed One declare that to me. If the Blessed One does not know either "after death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist" or "after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist," then it is straightforward for one who does not know and does not see to say: "I do not know, I do not see."'"

[The Buddha replied:] "How, then, Mālunkyāputta, did I ever say to you: 'Come, Mālunkyāputta, lead the holy life under me and I will declare to you "the world is eternal" . . . or "after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist'"?"—"No, venerable sir."—"Did you ever tell me: 'I will lead the holy life under the Blessed One, and the Blessed One will declare to me "the world is eternal" . . . or "after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist"'?"—"No, venerable sir."—"That being so, misguided man, who are you and what are you abandoning?

"If anyone should say thus: 'I will not lead the holy life under the Blessed One until the Blessed One declares to me "the world is eternal" . . . or "after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist," that would still remain undeclared by the Tathāgata and meanwhile that person would die. Suppose, Mālunkyāputta, a man were wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and companions, his kinsmen and relatives, brought

a surgeon to treat him. The man would say: 'I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble or a Brahmin or a merchant or a worker; . . . until I know the name and clan of the man who wounded me; . . . until I know whether the man who wounded me was tall or short or of middle height; . . . until I know whether the man who wounded me was dark or brown or golden-skinned; . . . until I know whether the man who wounded me lives in such a village or town or city; . . . until I know whether the bow that wounded me was a long bow or a crossbow; . . . until I know whether the bowstring that wounded me was fiber or reed or sinew or hemp or bark; . . . until I know whether the shaft that wounded me was wild or cultivated; . . . until I know with what kind of feathers the shaft that wounded me was fitted—whether those of a vulture or a crow or a hawk or a peacock or a stork; . . . until I know with what kind of sinew the shaft that wounded me was bound—whether that of an ox or a buffalo or a lion or a monkey; . . . until I know what kind of arrow it was that wounded me—whether it was hoof-tipped or curved or barbed or calf-toothed or oleander.'

"All this would still not be known to that man and meanwhile he would die. So, too, Mālunkyāputta, if anyone should say thus: 'I will not lead the holy life under the Blessed One until the Blessed One declares to me: "the world is eternal" . . . or "after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,'" that would still remain undeclared by the Tathāgata and meanwhile that person would die.

"Mālunkyāputta, if there is the view 'the world is eternal,' the holy life cannot be lived; and if there is the view 'the world is not eternal,' the holy life cannot be lived. Whether there is the view 'the world is eternal' or the view 'the world is not eternal,' there is birth, there is aging, there is death; there are sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair, the destruction of which I prescribe here and now. If there is the view 'the world is finite,' . . . 'the world is infinite,' . . . 'the soul is the same as the body,' . . . 'the soul is one thing and the body another,' . . . 'after death a Tathāgata exists,' . . . 'after death a Tathāgata does not exist,' the holy life cannot be lived. . . . If there is the view 'after death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist,' the holy life cannot be lived; and if there is the view 'after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,' the holy life cannot be lived. Whether there is the view 'after death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist' or the view 'after death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,' there is birth, there is aging, there

is death; there are sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair, the destruction of which I prescribe here and now.

"Therefore, Mālunkyāputta, remember what I have left undeclared as undeclared, and remember what I have declared as declared. And what have I left undeclared? 'The world is eternal'—I have left undeclared. 'The world is not eternal'—I have left undeclared. 'The world is finite'—I have left undeclared. 'The world is infinite'—I have left undeclared. 'The soul is the same as the body'—I have left undeclared. 'The soul is one thing and the body another'—I have left undeclared. 'After death a Tathāgata exists'—I have left undeclared. 'After death a Tathāgata does not exist'—I have left undeclared. 'After death a Tathāgata both exists and does not exist'—I have left undeclared. 'After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist'—I have left undeclared.

"Why have I left that undeclared? Because it is unbeneficial, it does not belong to the fundamentals of the holy life, it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana [i.e., Nirvana]. That is why I have left it undeclared.

"And what have I declared? 'This is suffering'—I have declared. 'This is the origin of suffering'—I have declared. 'This is the cessation of suffering'—I have declared. 'This is the way leading to the cessation of suffering'—I have declared.

"Why have I declared that? Because it is beneficial, it belongs to the fundamentals of the holy life, it leads to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbana. That is why I have declared it.

"Therefore, Mālunkyāputta, remember what I have left undeclared as undeclared, and remember what I have declared as declared."

That is what the Blessed One said. The venerable Mālunkyāputta was satisfied and delighted in the Blessed One's words.[1]

The point of this story is that the practice of the Buddhist path, and the end of suffering, does not depend on having accurate information about these "metaphysical" questions about the universe—that is, whether it is finite or infinite, eternal or non-eternal, and so on. Nor, surprisingly, does it depend on knowing the relation of something like a true self to the body and the empirical self. But lastly, it is not important

to know what becomes of the liberated man at death—in other words, to know exactly what Nirvana is. We may take this to mean that these questions are irrelevant to someone in our position—that is, someone who has been struck by the poison arrow of impermanence and suffering. We are in no state to process this information about either the present world or about the state of Nirvana that transcends it, nor can we do anything with it as long as we have the arrow in us.

Does this mean we can find these things out after we get the arrow removed? Does the attainment of Nirvana bring with it a new form of awareness that will allow us to know whether the universe is infinite or not, and so on? Or will these questions become irrelevant to us then? Or will we realize that these questions are in themselves unanswerable or even meaningless? The story does not tell us. It is not clear whether these questions are unanswerable, or just inconceivable to suffering sentient beings like us, or simply wrongly asked and wrongly conceived, as symptoms of our current state. In any case, we can expect, and require, no information about what Nirvana is nor how it is possible for it to "start," at least until we practice the path and reach Nirvana—and maybe not even then, when such information will perhaps be irrelevant or meaningless to us.

So we may conclude that Buddhist teachings are not intended to describe or depict ultimate realities about anything that is not available to our immediate experience right now, except to the extent that these are useful for the practice of Buddhism and the ending of suffering. This point is driven home by the famous Parable of the Raft:

"Bhikkhus, suppose a man in the course of a journey saw a great expanse of water, whose near shore was dangerous and fearful and whose further shore was safe and free from fear, but there was no ferryboat or bridge going to the far shore. Then he thought: 'There is this great expanse of water, whose near shore is dangerous and fearful and whose further shore is safe and free from fear, but there is no ferryboat or bridge going to the far shore. Suppose I collect grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bind them together into a raft, and supported by the raft and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore.' And then the man collected grass, twigs, branches, and leaves and bound them together into a raft, and supported by

the raft and making an effort with his hands and feet, he got safely across to the far shore. Then, when he had got across and had arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: 'This raft has been very helpful to me, since supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to hoist it on my head or load it on my shoulder, and then go wherever I want.' Now, bhikkhus, what do you think? By doing so, would that man be doing what should be done with that raft?"

"No, venerable sir."

"By doing what would that man be doing what should be done with that raft? Here, bhikkhus, when that man got across and had arrived at the far shore, he might think thus: 'This raft has been very helpful to me, since supported by it and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore. Suppose I were to haul it onto the dry land or set it adrift in the water, and then go wherever I want.' Now, bhikkhus, it is by so doing that that man would be doing what should be done with that raft. So I have shown you how the Dhamma [i.e., dharma (Buddhist teachings and practices)] is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping.

Bhikkhus, when you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even good states, how much more so bad states."[2]

This parable is a kind of master key to understanding Buddhism. It is a teaching, within the Buddhist teachings, about the Buddhist teachings. It highlights the basic Buddhist idea of nonattachment, pushing it even to a point of unprecedented consistency by applying it to Buddhism itself: attachment to Buddhism, as Buddhism, is also a form of attachment and brings with it all the problems that attachment in any form creates. Buddhism has a built-in self-obsolescence clause. It is for temporary use, not for eternal devotion. It is not to be clung to. This point of view also provides a very powerful mechanism for self-critique within Buddhism, for self-overturning, for self-revision, which will become crucial for the development of the Mahāyāna, as we shall soon explore.

But please note also that this parable is not only about the importance of nonattachment; it is also about the importance of attachment. It is a two-edged sword. It provides an explanation for why there must be some commitment, some clinging, in spite of the fact that attachment in

general is the cause of all our problems. It tells us about how and why and what to desire even in the midst of our understanding that desire is the cause of suffering. It provides us with another model of the Middle Way. A raft must be clung to, committed to, depended on single-mindedly *at a certain time*—that is, while one is on the way across the river. If you were to invoke the principle of nonattachment while still crossing the river, and therefore "let go" of the raft, you would drown and never reach the other shore. This parable gives a reason to be completely devoted to Buddhism, to accept its teachings and to practice accordingly, but also to be mentally prepared to drop it all eventually. It also tells us how we should regard these teachings: as tools, not as descriptions of truth.

The Parable of the Raft gives us a structure for both setting up and knocking down particular beliefs and practices, built into the suggestion that all ideas are fundamentally tools rather than information about ultimate reality or depictions of the state to which they can lead us. Tools have value only in relation to a particular project, something we are trying to do. In the Buddhist case, what we are trying to do is end suffering. Ideas and prescribed practices, including morals, have value only to the extent that they work in advancing us toward this goal. That is the criterion for their value. An idea, a moral code, or a set of spiritual practices is good if clinging to it for a time moves us closer to the other shore—the state of freedom from suffering. These ideas do not describe that state of freedom from suffering. They provide no information about it other than a road map about how to get there. They are not good ideas because they are true ideas, if "true" means "corresponding exactly to what is ultimately the case." They are not good practices because they produce obedience to what is "right" as prescribed by a deity or as built into the nature of the cosmos. Even karmic consequences really have nothing to do with right and wrong. They are concerned only with what is painful or pleasant and, above all, with what helps one get free of suffering entirely.

THE COMMANDANT OR THE OFF-DUTY TAXI DRIVER?

We must remember all this whenever we look at Buddhist philosophy, Buddhist institutions, and Buddhist ethics. One will find there many appeals to devoted trust and faith in the Buddha, acceptance of the au-

thority of the Buddha, as well as elaborate codes of precepts and intricate philosophical dogmas. And yet they all have nothing to do with truth, except in a strictly pragmatic sense of claiming to lead one to a vantage point from which one might experience truth oneself, if "truth" is still the applicable term here. One might object, "But this, too, involves a claim about truth. For aren't you Buddhists claiming that it is 'true' that these practices will, in fact, lead to the desired result? Why should we be impelled to believe this? We cannot escape the reference to truth!"

This objection is valid in a certain way, but it is also typical of the kind of problem that tends to arise especially for people who have grown up either in the bosom or in the afterglow of a basically monotheistic orientation to the world. The basic model behind Buddhist thinking is quite different. The difference can be illustrated by the contrast between the following two scenarios. In the first, you are a slave or servant of a powerful man who gives you an order: you must go across town, riding three miles on a bicycle; then stop and get a Cherry Coke; then turn left and walk 155 feet to a bus stop; wait until the number 6 bus comes, and sit as far toward the back as possible; get off at the first downtown stop and hop on one foot for seven minutes. Then sit on a park bench with your hands on top of your head; smile at every passerby except the fourth one you see, at whom you should scowl; and then return home using the same route in reverse.

Since you are owned or employed by this man, your sole concern here would be to obey. It doesn't matter why he wants you to do this—it is his business, not yours, that is being done. To know the truth—who you are, what your place is in the overall scheme of things—means to know that you are not to question it. But even if you did, even if you could understand his reasons for wanting you to undertake this errand, even if your lord graciously says that he regards you as a friend, although making clear what he means by "friend" (i.e., if he were to say, "You are my friend if you do whatever I command. I no longer call you servant, because a servant does not know his master's business"), it is still a command, and the whole affair is *his* errand. You are obligated to do it exactly as specified. Otherwise you have failed in your task and are rightly subject to your master's disapproval or punishment. What matters here is the recognition of the absolute rights of the master, the correct un-

derstanding of his commands, and the exact obedience to it. Add to this the notion that your master is actually the creator of the entire city and of yourself; he is your absolute master because he is the source of your being. You *belong* to him absolutely. He has the right to tell you what to do, what the purpose of your existence is, and has set up all the parameters of your situation. Only he knows what is what and what is good, because it is he who defines these things for all. Your only job is to find out what he wants and to do it, whether or not this includes gaining an understanding of whether and why it might be good for yourself as well.

It is worth considering how much of our commonsensical idea of both "truth" and "goodness" continues to derive from this basically monotheistic model. It can be discerned whenever we have any feeling that the ideas we are holding in our head are failing to match something authoritative out in the world, that we would be culpably "in the wrong" in a morally tinged way by being mistaken about something, that truth has something to do with the submission to authoritative facts concerning how the "real world" was made, what its rules or "laws" are, what we were made for, or what this reality "demands" of us. We might suspect a similar source to any sense we might have that we must be *obedient* to rules or laws about what is right or good, a sense that there are demands that we are obligated to obey simply by virtue of existing in the world.

Now, imagine that you yourself have decided that you don't like it here uptown. There's an off-duty cab driver over there who knows his way all around the city, and he seems to be saying that things are much better downtown. His description of what's unsatisfying about this uptown life rings true to you, so you ask him if he knows how to get downtown. He says he has much experience getting there and knows the way, and he can also advise you about the best way to avoid traffic. Perhaps the route he describes is identical to the one the master in the previous example suggests. But now the situation is quite different. This is *your* project, not his. If you decide halfway through that this is too much trouble, that things really weren't all that bad uptown after all, you are perfectly free to abandon the whole project and turn back. He will have no reason to blame you, much less punish you, since it was not his command that set you on your journey. If you have doubts about the seemingly senseless things he recommends, you might question them. He

may or may not explain the reasoning behind them. In either case, you are free to experiment with accepting or rejecting his advice and seeing what the result is. You can omit some of the steps he recommends and see how it goes; it is your business. His authority and the accuracy of his statements will still matter to you, of course: if you believe that he really is a cab driver who knows the traffic, and who has been downtown and knows that things are better there, and is someone whose descriptions of his experiences uptown ring true to you, you will be more inclined to take his advice. But both the *what* and the *how* are not binding on you in any way. This cab driver did not create you. You are not his servant. Your goal is not to please him. Your goal is whatever you decide is your goal.

So it is with Buddhist doctrine and ethics. They are not descriptions of truths, and they are not categorical obligations. They are available methods. The question of "truth" enters only in the sense of this sort of question: does the raft work? Will it hold? Will it get us to the other side? And is the other side really any better than over here?

Buddhists are people who trust the Buddha's authority on these matters; they take his word that Nirvana really is the end of suffering, that the methods he propounds will really get one there. Speaking neutrally, this might be true and it might be false. In principle, however, it is meant to be testable; one can try it out and see if it works. Such testing is not completely without risk, of course; perhaps the Buddha is a deceiver or has misjudged the case, and you will end up clinging to a raft that breaks apart in midstream or end up on a barren shore. Perhaps you will have to spend hours stuck in traffic gridlock, a much worse day than if you had just stayed home uptown watching television. But this is the kind of risk we take whenever we try anything out; weighing the available evidence, the costs and the possible benefits, one must judge for oneself whether the risk is worth taking.

THE TWO TRUTHS

Buddhist doctrines and practices are a "raft." Even the idea of Nirvana as "elsewhere" or "elsewhen" is just a raft. These doctrines are true not as descriptions about what is so, but only as useful tools to attain something we have decided to try to do. In an important sense, even our common

ideas about the world are true only in this same sense: *as rafts*. Some Mahāyāna schools declare that everything we can think, everything that involves a definition of what things are, can only be "a conventional truth"—that is, something that is *useful* because it is agreed upon, as a tool that enables living creatures of a certain type to do certain things. None of them is, or needs claim to be, a description of what is ultimately "so" or what anything ultimately "is." What, then, makes any statement worth stating? What makes some statements good and others not good to make? Why should we accept any claim in preference to any other claim?

The criterion for what makes something count as a conventional truth, as a reliable and worthwhile thing to say and accept, is the same as that applied to the raft: (1) it gets the job done, and (2) it can be discarded once the job is done rather than clung to as applicable at all times and forever. Any statement that did not lead to its own discarding, any statement that did not allow itself to be transcended, would therefore not be a good raft, not be a good word, not be a "truth." Now, the Buddhist goal is freedom from suffering, freedom from attachment. Good words, "truths," would be those statements that are conducive to attaining this goal. Conventional truths are statements that know how to transcend themselves, that lead to self-transcendence. These would include the following:

1. Ordinary speech: we say "I," "you," "this," "that," "cause," and "effect" every day without worrying about whether these can be philosophically justified or ultimately unpacked. We use them, and they are serviceable for certain practical endeavors, whether or not it is possible to devise a theory that works through all of their implications or applies them consistently and universally. We use them only as pragmatic tools, without trying to justify their ultimate correspondence to reality. The Buddha used them too and could not have pointed out the way to practice Buddhism without them. To communicate with his listeners, he had to use terms they understood: "You are suffering"; "You can be free of suffering." But strictly speaking, he said, there is no "you." "You" is a conventional truth. "End suffering" is also a conventional truth.

2. Buddhist terminology: the Four Noble Truths, the principle of conditionality, the teachings of impermanence and suffering, the Eight-

fold Path, and even everything in this paragraph, even the whole idea of nonself and Emptiness, as an idea, as a theory—these are also effective tools, building upon and supplementing ordinary speech, that are useful in reaching the goal. These are the raft: they lead beyond themselves.

But if we were to take either ordinary speech or Buddhist terminology to denote absolute truths, they would cease to be good words, they would cease to be effective rafts, they would no longer lead beyond themselves. This is what happens in metaphysical theories that purport to tell us how the world really is. Because we speak of causality and of "you" and "me" in ordinary speech, philosophers try to apply the principle of causality *universally*: there is, or there is not, a first cause. The universe is created by a god. The universe is formed by random material processes. The universe follows fixed and definite laws. I do, or I do not, exist after death. These are cases of taking a conventional truth, valuable only for its use, and regarding it as literally true. We cannot say anything at all definitively about "what" or "how" things "are," for there is no particular "way" they "are." Indeed, as we shall see in the next chapter, astonishing as it may seem at first, there are no "things" to be one way or another.

So the Two Truths approach to the world does indeed give us a way to accept some statements and reject others. All statements and beliefs that claim to give universal and literal truth are to be rejected, for these lead to attachment and not to their own eventual raft-like relinquishment. This includes all metaphysics and dogmatic religion, but also the results of science and the "laws of nature" it deduces if they are viewed naively as a literal description of what is really the case. These beliefs tend to get "stuck" and thus to exacerbate the problem: they lodge the arrow deeper into your breast. Following the Two Truths approach, this is what qualifies such beliefs as just plain *false*. This category of falseness also includes Buddhist ideas if they are taken literally as point-blank facts, including the ideas of causality, transmigration, suffering, nonself, and Nirvana.

The next category is truths, statements, and beliefs to be accepted and embraced. Truth is defined as conventional truth. In other words, any term or belief or statement that serves as a raft, that includes within it a means to the transcending and abolishing of itself, and to the transcending and abolishing of all "views" (i.e., absolute and literal beliefs)

whatsoever is thereby to be called a (conventional) truth and is to be adopted. This includes ordinary speech and commonsensical notions, as well as scientific findings, inasmuch as they leave their metaphysical groundings unexplored, along with specific teachings of Buddhism, such as karma, transmigration, causality, nonself, and so on.

And what is ultimate truth? Just the experience of Nirvana, which is the relinquishing of all views, of greed, anger, and delusion, the end of suffering. We can say all of this about it, but all of this is also merely conventional truth, to be accepted only because it is useful in getting beyond these descriptions to the real deal. In the end, it is something that is to be experienced but that cannot be described. It is not being, not nonbeing, not both, not neither. It is not this world, nor any other world, nor the absence of all worlds. We might describe it as Emptiness, but as a description, that also is just a conventional truth, not to be "grasped" as a view. Mahāyāna texts remind us that Emptiness is also empty, that Emptiness is also a conventional truth, a raft, although perhaps the most advanced one of all.

The Tiantai teachings, on which we will focus in chapters to come, accept this Two Truth model but supplement it in a way that changes its consequences radically. Unlike every other Buddhist school, Tiantai proposes a Three Truths approach. In addition to conventional truth and ultimate truth, a third will be put forth: the Center. But to understand what this means and what its consequences are, we must first spend a little time exploring the pre-Tiantai understanding of that most powerful—that is, the most self-subversive—of all conventional truths: the teaching of Emptiness.

THREE

NEITHER THUS NOR OTHERWISE

Mahāyāna Approaches to Emptiness

SO IT LOOKS LIKE MAHĀYĀNA BUDDHISM, IN THE TWO TRUTHS model we were just talking about, makes no claim to offer any statements containing literal information about the ultimate makeup of this world, why it exists, or how it came to be. At the same time, nothing at all is said to describe the state of liberation from this world of suffering, the "other shore," except perhaps that *it is absolutely unlike this world of suffering*. These are two sides of the same coin. Neither the world of suffering nor its cessation is what we think it is. In fact, neither *can* be *whatever* we might think it is if our thinking makes a definite judgment about them, if we form a definitive conclusive concept of them. Whatever you think, whatever you *can* think, about any individual thing is necessarily wrong. Why? Because the very first premise is wrong: the premise that there is a *thing* here at all, in the way we think of things. How do we think of a "thing"? As persisting through time, as underlying and possessing its characteristics, as having definite borders, as arising and perishing at one time and place, being any one way rather than another on its own power, from its own side. What is a thing? *A thing is whatever has the power to exclude another thing.* Even our usual idea of a "state" is really a kind of "thing" in this sense; when we are in one state, we are not in another. As long as this seems self-evident to us, we are thinking "thingishly."

It is because this commonsensical assumption about the existence of mutually exclusive "things" does not hold for them that Mahāyāna Buddhists can go on to claim, "Nirvana is identical to the world of suffering." But this, too, cannot be understood if we continue to think of them

as two "things" and then try somehow to superimpose these two things. Instead, the Two Truths model is a way to wean ourselves from this type of "thing-thinking" based on attachment, which inevitably leads to suffering. When that is done, our previous sense of Nirvana as a state that *excludes* some other state, suffering—or of suffering as a state that excludes Nirvana—disappears.

EMPTINESS

How do Mahāyāna Buddhists unravel the customary view of the "things" we see, feel, think of, experience? This is accomplished through the Mahāyāna idea of "Sunyata." The most common, and most literal, translation of this term into English is "Emptiness." Some translators, to avoid the supposedly negative connotations of this word, have tried others: "voidness," "relativity," "openness." In the Tiantai context it is more useful to translate it with another term: *ontological ambiguity*. What in the world does that mean?

The philosophical arguments for Emptiness are used in Mahāyāna literature as a therapeutic technique to undermine any preexisting view of how things are, based on a preexistent but ultimately untenable belief that there "exist," in some definitive sense, "things" that possess some particular unambiguous identity. Logic can be used here, for those who find that useful, although it must be remembered that here we are talking only of Emptiness as an idea, which is to say, of a conventional truth. The purpose of this conventional truth is to uproot other, lower-level conventional truths. Therefore it presupposes the assumptions that ground those other beliefs and tries to undermine them from within. The biggest of these is the assumption that there are "things" in the world, or that the world itself or the mind itself is a thing, meaning something self-existing and bearing its own unambiguous characteristics. Still, these logical approaches to Emptiness are to be taken as methods of removal of views, not as the establishing of a view of their own. They are not to be taken as ultimate truth. Ultimate truth, for most Mahāyāna writers, is still a matter of silent direct experience, about which nothing can be said, although we will see that this, too, changes radically in the *Lotus Sūtra* and the Tiantai tradition.

The idea of Emptiness can be stated quite simply: since all things arise only due to causes and conditions, no thing (or state, being, condition, experience, element, or reality) can ever exist independently. You might simply say, then, that all things are connected to one another, related to one another. Nothing can be separated. Nothing can be isolated. Everybody knows this. The simple everyday idea of cause and effect is all we need to notice here. But what is important is to apply this commonsensical truism *universally*, to all elements of experience without exception, and, above all, to remember that things are not just *accidentally* related to each other, but *necessarily* connected. They cannot exist in isolation. It is not only that no thing can exist in isolation; it is also that no single aspect, characteristic, attribute, or quality of any of them can exist in isolation. Whatever you are seeing, touching, thinking, or feeling right now, it got there and it got the way it is because of something else. This applies on every level. "Something else" is involved in whatever you have before you now. Something other than every aspect of it is necessarily involved in every aspect of it. Let's say you have a warm cup of coffee in front of you. Something other than warmth (for example, the electric cord connected to the coffeemaker) is involved in making it warm. Something other than coffee (for example, earth and sunlight) is involved in making it coffee. Something other than a cup (for example, potters and labor) is involved in making it a cup. Without this involvement, there would be no warmth, no coffee, no cup. None of these elements exists in isolation.

But here is where things get tricky: do they, then, exist in connection to each other? The answer is no. This is where the idea of Emptiness really kicks in. There are no things without relations. The relations between all things are necessary relations. But if two things are necessarily related, such that they cannot exist without each other, then they are really not *two things*; they are *two parts* of one thing. There is only one thing there, with two parts. But a relation, by definition, is a relation between two things. Hence there are no relations either! There are no individual things to be related. Moreover, each time we note the particular non-X (for example, the electric cord) that forms the necessary condition for a given X (in this case, the warmth of the coffee), we are faced with the same problem all over again: this X and its necessary non-X now

form a new set, a new entity: X-plus-non-X, warmth-plus-electric-cord. The same principle applies again: the total set warmth-plus-electric-cord depends on some non-(warmth-plus-electric-cord), whatever stands outside this total set, in order to exist. What happens, then, when we keep expanding outward to include all possible existences, the whole of the cosmos? This, too, needs an "other." How about the set "the entire universe and its necessary other"? This, too, needs an other. This pattern would go on forever. So instead we simply remove the premise of all these problems: the idea that there *is* a definitive "thing," with its own characteristics, identified definitively in one way rather than another, ever, anywhere. Let us try to clarify what this means.

THE WHOLE/PART APPROACH

Emptiness, as an idea, is simply a matter of noticing that for whatever we might identify in any way—let's call it X—there is always something non-X that is *necessarily* involved in its being X, such that the removal of the non-X would also entail the removal of the X. This goes for every state, every substance, every feeling, every part, every whole, every set, and every set of sets that we think we are identifying. There are many ways Sunyata is approached in Mahāyāna literature. The most straightforward approach is to look at how any whole, X, is necessarily dependent on its parts, which considered in themselves are non-X (the whole/part approach). At the most basic level it is simply an extension of the basic nonself idea, now applied to all possible elements of experience or thought without exception. What I called "myself" has been analyzed into its component parts, various natural conditional processes. There is no "myself"; what I called myself is really made of these conditional processes. The self is not real, but the momentary processes, the elements themselves, are real, are facts of the matter. Such and such a state arises as a result of such and such causes and conditions; we mistakenly identify with some subset of these real states, on the basis of a certain inattentiveness to them and to the effects of the states of desire that are among them, and attach the label "self" to it. That is the nonself idea in its simplest form.

But now we go on to note that each of these processes is also not a "self": not only is there no "myself"; there is also no "themselves" of the processes that constitute me. Let's start with the simplest way: simply to analyze things into their component parts and to notice that we can never reach something that cannot be analyzed down further.[1] The *parts* of a thing are something other than the whole that they form. Apples are not made of "appleness"; they are made of lots of different "non-appleness," and when all the non-apple is removed, there is no apple left. What "is" an apple? Anyone who has taken an introductory philosophy class, or been an even slightly dreamy eleven-year-old, knows that we can keep asking for more definitions no matter how many answers might be given to this question. An apple "is" juice and pulp and skin. But what are those? They "are" a cluster of molecules of a certain composition. But what is a molecule? It "is" a certain arrangement of atoms. But what is an atom? It "is" neutrons and protons and electrons and other particles in a certain energy configuration, with certain characteristic types of activity. But what is energy, what is activity, what is a particle? Each question is answered *in terms of* something else. When we get to the most ultimate possible term, there is nothing in terms of which the question can be answered. The words in the dictionary are defined by other words. When we ask what something is "made of," we need an answer that is something *else*. What is the universe made of? What is energy made of? What is space-time made of?

THE CAUSE/EFFECT APPROACH

A second approach to understanding Emptiness would be to look at the arising of X in time, as a result of prior conditions (the cause/effect approach).[2] The arising of the effect, X, is necessarily dependent on the prior causes, non-X. For any entity X to exist means to be determinate, for it to have limits, because its nonexistence must differ in some real way from its existence. There must be some range, whether conceptually (i.e., among the set of all conceivable entities) or of literal time and space, where X does not apply, some place, time, or conceivable entities in which X is lacking. Hence X cannot be omnipresent and eternal.

Otherwise it would be indeterminate and hence nonexistent. Thus it appears only under certain conditions, at a certain time, and a certain place. Now, the conditions of the existence of X must have some kind of relationship with X in order to accomplish the work of "conditioning" it, of causing it to exist. Conditioning, in other words, is some kind of relationship between two entities: the conditioning and the conditioned. This applies whether we are speaking of material causality or any other kind of conditioning (e.g., conceptual contrast).

But for two entities to have any kind of relationship, they must both exist. These two terms must both exist for there to be any relationship between them, and "conditioning the existence of" is a kind of relationship. However, this can never be the case if we are speaking of the conditioning, not of the state of X, but of the very emergence of X into existence. If we imagine a ground of X's existence, which coexists with X and sustains it in being, we must ask why X arose at some particular time after the ground was already in existence. The cause of X cannot be simply the preexisting ground itself, because otherwise X would have to have arisen as soon as the ground was present. If X and the ground came into existence in the same instant, then we can call the entire system "X and its ground" one entity and ask about the causes of the emergence of this entity. X can coexist with the conditions that sustain it, but it cannot possibly coexist with the conditions of its own arising, the causes that began its existence. If it did, X would already exist prior to this relationship and thus would require no conditions to allow it to exist. Moreover, even in the case of conditioning the state of a preexistent thing, we must ask if this "state" exists or not. If not, it cannot modify the thing it is the state of, but if this state in any way "exists," the same impossibility also applies to the conditioning of its existence. Therefore, X cannot possibly arise, cannot possibly be X as a real "simply located" entity so conceived. X as such is "empty."

This is easy to understand if we consider the state of the entire totality of being at moment M and at moment M+1. The state of things at M is thought to have the power to cause the arising of the state of things at M+1. But if M is gone when M+1 arrives, it cannot "reach" M+1 to do anything to it; it is already gone, nonexistent, and thus can do nothing. If the state of things at M continues to exist when M+1 arrives, however,

time has failed to move ahead, or we must admit the coexistence of two alternate total states of being at the same time. If the appearance of M+1 does not necessitate the disappearance of M (which by our hypothesis possesses the power to bring about M+1), M would continue to generate precisely M+1 repeatedly forever. In either case, time would not be possible, and no real entities could arise. Hence the Mahāyāna claims that without Emptiness, if there were any being that were not empty, nothing could come to exist. The same argument applies equally to causality of one state by another in space, or of one part of the totality causing or conditioning another. We have a parallel argument about coexistence or superimposition in space, about the impossibility of contact between two diverse entities in a single unit of space.

THE THING/CHARACTERISTIC APPROACH

Another way to get at this is what we can call the "thing/characteristic" or "owner/owned" approach, because the Emptiness argument is also sometimes presented this way: to exist is supposed to mean that a thing is just itself and nothing else; to do this it must have (at least) one "mark" or characteristic that distinguishes it, that is unshared by anything else. "Liquid" possesses the characteristic of being "wet." If the wetness is taken away, what we have is not called a liquid, and where we find wetness, we say that there must be some liquid there that possesses this characteristic, this mark. Now, what is the relationship between "liquid" and "wetness"? Is the distinguishing mark the same or different from the thing it is the mark of? If the mark is the same, then no marked thing is distinguished—just a mark has arisen, not a marked thing, and hence no existence. If the mark is different from the marked thing, it is not this thing's own mark, but another *thing*; we have two existent entities, a marked thing and a mark, each of which demands the mark/marked structure in order to count as "existent entity," and again no marked thing is established.

Does this mark itself "exist"? If not, how can the thing be marked by a nonexistent mark? If so, the mark must itself *possess* a mark, the same mark/marked structure must apply to it as any other existent thing, and we have the same problem. Hence it is concluded that the mark/

marked structure makes no sense, and with it any meaningful claim that "some particular things, disposed in some way or other, with some characteristic or other, exist" cannot be established. In this sense it is said that the existence of things is purely illusory, a category mistake. They are not "real existences" in the sense of being entities with properties, characteristic marks. Each one is susceptible to the same analysis: each one is nothing but the totality of what it does; if you take away all of its relations, all of its characteristics, all of the ways it affects other things, it fails to register as anything at all.

The apple is red, sweet, firm, weighty, waxy, and so on. Taking all of these away, what is it? But each of these is a way the apple relates to another thing and is produced by this interaction. What it *is* is the totality of what it does, and what it *does* is something it is incapable of controlling, something of which it can never be a sole cause.

THE LANGUAGE APPROACH

The same point can be made by focusing purely on the question of how words are used, what we mean when we use certain terms, what is going on in designating a "thing."[3] The point can be stated very simply: all names are *abstractions*. That's the whole Emptiness argument. No name refers to a single, unambiguous, decisively determinate entity. By "abstract," I mean "leaving behind some part of the total relevant data, picking out part rather than whole." Most people have no trouble seeing that in a certain sense "the French Revolution" is an abstract term. It refers to a large set of events, performed by many agents over a long period of time, as viewed retrospectively by certain types of consciousnesses (those with historical, sociological, political interests; others looking back at the very same events would perhaps use other terms—"the fall of my family," "the background of my childhood," "what the barbarians were doing during the Qing dynasty," etc.). Nonetheless, in some contexts I speak about "the French Revolution" as an agent, as a cause, as something that did something: "the French Revolution inspired the Russian Revolution."

By setting up a name, we think we have found a "thing." Then we think that one of these "things" causes another "thing" to happen, appear,

manifest, exist. But this too, causality itself, is a conventional truth based on the mistaken belief in "things." The problem lies in the "what" of that which is caused and that which is causing. The definition of "thing" is posited by the framing capacity of the mind. Let's take the concrete example of a rock. The word "rock" can only be a conventional designation. So when you say the "rock" is caused to move by this other entity called "gravity," we have to ask for a definition of each of these and how a relationship between them is possible if they have fixable definitions. How much of the total reality is the "rock"? Where, and more importantly *when*, does it begin and end? Does the definition of the rock include "affectability by gravity" or not? If it does, "gravity" is already analytically part of the "itself" of the rock (it is inconceivable and indefinable in the absence of gravity), and hence it cannot be "caused" to act by gravity, because causality implies a relationship between two different things; otherwise it becomes "the rock causes itself to move," and so on, assuming we include the entire definition of "rock." (You cannot say, "It includes susceptibility to gravity, but not gravity itself," not only for obvious empirical reasons, but because "susceptibility to gravity" must now be analyzed as an entity that either exists or does not and cannot be conceived in abstraction from "gravity" itself.) "X causes itself" is no explanation, and no actual causation then takes place. If we do exclude gravity from the definition of "rock," we have an even worse problem: for these identities to stand, they must be mutually exclusive, which means they can never be in the same place at the same time. In that case, how can they ever affect each other in any way? It doesn't help to introduce some third medium through which some mysterious entity like the "influence" of the cause passes to the effect; then we have the same problem all over again.

So the whole problem is about how to define the terms that are allegedly doing the causing and being caused. Their borders are not fixable in any single definitive, nonself-contradictory way; they are fixed conventionally, in a total system of interpretation that suits the needs and perspectives of a particular sentient being's cognitive apparatus. If I say, "Cold temperature causes water to freeze," besides the obvious fact that there are a million other conditioning causes left out of the statement, I have to be able to designate some entity called "cold temperature." Why

not say rather that the freezing of water is one way of looking at what is, in another way of looking, described as "cold temperature"? They are not cause and effect; they are two ways of describing the same event, within two different interpretative frameworks and with a different focal point. It's really no different from saying, "The slowing down of molecular motion causes the water to freeze": the slowing down of molecular motion *is* the freezing of the water, described with respect to the macro level. But this "is" can no longer be interpreted as the usual "sameness," since it does not exclude and contrast itself to what is normally called "difference."

Let's talk about the chair you are sitting on. Are there both a chair and its mark, its identifying characteristic? The point is that "chair" and "configuration of materials able to support a weight above the ground" are just two alternate descriptions of the same thing. The grammatical structure of a definitional identity, however, is built into our ordinary thinking, and it breaks this in two: there's the chair, which possesses this ability. The ability to support weight "belongs to" the chair. But really there is just an event, a temporal experience or set of experiences, the supporting of weight, described in various ways. When the chair breaks, we say, "It is no longer a chair, because it can no longer support weight. Now it is just firewood." But there we have just pushed the "subject" back another level; in addition to losing its identity as chair, it has lost its ability to bear weight. Yet wouldn't it be easier to say that the broader subject, "wood," can do these two alternate things, burn and support weight, depending on the situation and the conditions? Well, keep pushing this subject back; eventually it is no longer identifiable as any particular thing at all, because it encompasses all marks and all putative substances.

The attempt to define anything, to find out what anything *is* once and for all, is itself based on a kind of "self" idea: the fact *itself* must be so-and-so, a certain way and no other, unconditionally. For it to be simply true that, say, the apple is red, would require the "one cause–one effect" principle that is denied by the nonself doctrine of Buddhism: the idea that everything arises through a combination of causes and conditions. The redness of the apple would have to be brought about by a *single* cause: the existence of the apple. The apple, acting alone, would have to have the power to make its redness appear. It would have to be a "self," a sole

cause. For anything to be true of anything, for any "thing" to "have" any "characteristics," would require some form of single-agent causality. If we deny this, as Buddhists do, we cannot say that it is simply a "fact" that "the apple is red." On the contrary, the redness of the apple is a result of a combination of factors—notably, the conjunction of the apple and a certain kind of visual apparatus, a nervous system, a habit of organizing impressions so as to divide the apple from what is not-apple, a system of names and associations and desires that condition this, and so on. Even if we fold all the conditions of the material object into one and call that the "apple," any and every attribute of the apple will require additional conditions in order for the apple to come into being.

EMPTINESS AS THE SELF-OVERCOMING OF BOTH HOLISM AND REDUCTIONISM

"Reductionism" is a method of explaining things by breaking them down into their parts, like some of the early Buddhists do, and regarding the qualities of the whole formed by these parts as somehow secondary, less real, or wholly abstract. It may seem that the Emptiness idea, continuing this trend, is thus another, extreme form of reductionism. On the other hand, it may seem that the Emptiness idea, with its emphasis on the interconnection and inseparability of things, their inability to stand alone, seeing reality only in the entire configuration, is an extreme form of the opposite method, usually called "holism"—the view that the emergent wholes formed by structural combinations of part are also real, or are even more real, than the parts. But actually Emptiness is both of these and neither of these. The Emptiness position is a kind of reductionism that goes so far that it actually undermines reductionism itself; at the same time it is a kind of holism that goes so far that it undermines holism as well.

The usual sort of reductionist will perhaps say, of the previous example ("the French Revolution inspired the Russian Revolution"), "This is really just a shorthand way of saying that some of the Russians heard stories about the French and took actions accordingly," and of course more hard-core reductionists go further, saying, "Some Russians hearing a story about France and reacting is really just a shorthand way of saying

those vibrations agitated that eardrum and incited those nerve impulses, etc." Each name turns out to be "a way of saying something else." This way of thinking wants to explain things in terms of the lowest level, which will finally be unambiguous, the ultimate truth of the matter: what molecules, forces, laws are "doing." But the point is that whatever these entities are, they will be just as "abstract" as "the French Revolution": merely one optional way of describing a bunch of "something elses" which is appropriate and meaningful in some contexts but not others. When I call this a table, or call myself Brook, I am picking out some of what is relevant and leaving behind other parts, just like when I say "the French Revolution." When I call some isolated set of processes an "atom," I am doing the same thing. When I call some part of all that exists "this process," I am doing the same thing. It is I, my language, my desires, that is setting up the borders that define where and when this "thing" begins and ends, how much of the universe of experience I will identify as "this."

Here we see how consistent reductionism leads to the refutation of reductionism. Some Mahāyāna thinkers used to use a critique of the mathematical point as a general refutation of matter, and that will serve us here as well. It's the problem with trying to go down to the lowest level, as if that were without abstraction, and more than an optional name. Whatever the smallest particle is, in order to exist it would have to be more than a mathematical point—that is, it would have to have some extension—otherwise it would be indistinguishable from nothing (besides being, manifestly, an abstraction). If anything touched or affected an entity with no extension, a true mathematical point, that interface would be indistinguishable from the entire point; none of it would extend "beyond" the surface of the interface. That means it is divisible in the sense that it "has parts." That means that what touches or affects one part of it does not touch or affect the other parts necessarily. When it is "hit" or "causally affected" on the left side, we need a further explanation about how this "effect" passes to the right side—in short, the same problem repeated, or else thrown back to a holism: the idea that what affects the part is thereby affecting the whole, without requiring an intermediate mechanism of relation between the parts. The parts once again can be viewed as separate things and the problem is repeated.

More simply stated, anything compound requires further reductionist analysis, but anything non-compound (without parts, truly "simple") is a meaningless abstraction.

So every nameable entity is in the same boat as "the French Revolution." It is an abstract, sometimes useful convention, taking account of some but not all of what is relevant, but that is always in danger of coming apart at the seams, being renamed in another way that seems more accurate, seems to account for more realities. There is only the totality of interrelations, but these cannot be interrelations "between" predesignated "things." That means even "interrelations" cannot really stand, since that presupposes "things" between which the relations exist. "Relations" means "relations between things." If there are only relations, there are no things. But if there are no things, there are no relations either. Whatever we think of, whatever we identify, is an isolated thing; to be determinate as this rather than that, it must be separated out over against a background. Emptiness means that whatever we identify as "there," whatever states, things, processes, entities of any kind we identify are based on an arbitrary abstraction: it cannot be taken as the literal, complete truth. The one thing we know is that nothing is what we think it is. For all our naming of things seems to presuppose "a thing" with some "characteristics" that "belong to" it. This "owning" of characteristics, however, is impossible. This means there are really no "things" if a "thing" is something that "has" some characteristics, such as being red or green, hot or cold, heavy or light, even present or absent, existent or nonexistent.

THE THIS/THAT APPROACH

Finally, we have what might be called the "foreground/background" or "this/that contrast" approach, which is perhaps the most comprehensive and decisive version of the Emptiness idea as it is applied in Tiantai thinking, as we shall see.

The problem with simply stating, "All things are inseparable; the universe is one inseparable whole," is that we tend to then form a picture in our mind of "the whole universe." But this picture is always misleading. Whatever way we may try to picture the whole, the whole of wholes,

is also self-contradictory. Let's say I were to claim that the entire universe is "black." But black has to be contrasted to something in order to be black: white, or at least "non-blackness." Let's say I claim the entire universe is "white." I have the same problem. How about, "The entire universe is matter-energy"? "The entire universe is space-time"? "The entire universe is spirit"? "The entire universe is Emptiness"? The same problem arises in each case. There must be something *outside* of whiteness, or blackness, or space-time, or matter-energy, or spirit, or Emptiness, in contrast to which it can be determined to be what it is. The universe as a whole can have no particular characteristics. It can only be indeterminate. When we picture it, we are implicitly placing it within a frame, to which it is contrasted. So if we imagine infinite blackness, we are actually also putting some implicit non-blackness around it, which allows it to appear to us as "blackness."

Notice, then, that all of these claims, which seem to be opposed, actually end up meaning the same thing: "all is white" and "all is black" seem to be opposite views, but both "crash" in the same way and undermine their own claims, yielding only an indeterminate whole. Emptiness is this self-undermining of any claim about the whole. Notice also that this begs the question about "indeterminateness" itself, or about the very notion of "the whole." There is no whole without the contrast to "parts," something less than the whole. We cannot simply say, "There is only the whole, albeit one we can never know, which is indeterminate," either. There is no whole.

And how about the parts? We might think that while nothing can be said about the whole, at least we can make some claims about the parts themselves, for there we have the contrast we need to something outside. At least particular things, then, should be determinate and have their own identifiable characteristics. I can say, "My hat is red," since there exists within the whole a "non-hat," in contrast to which I can establish the "hatness" of the hat and "non-red" to establish the redness of the red. But this doesn't work either, because to say, "My hat is red" implies also saying something about the whole. It implies saying, "The whole is such that my hat is red," or "My hat being red is part of the entirety of facts about all that exists." If the entirety of what exists is indeterminate, the redness of the hat must be indeterminate too.

As for the basic substances of the universe, we can know in advance what they are and aren't, because whatever we have named them in the process of trying to get the explanation to apply to more and more, the names will crash when it is shown that these substances explain everything without exception. Chair, wood, matter, basic substance, nothing, XXXXXX (nameless, all names)—the procedure is the same for each of these steps, with the last simply running out of contrasts by which to obtain any determinate content.

Another way to say this is simply to note that our conception of the world as consisting of mutually exclusive and definitively identified things is shaped by our practical desires. Our desires always depend on a kind of choice, identifying *this*, which I want, as opposed to *that*, which I don't want. But any way we define something, whether explicitly or implicitly, whatever we think, whatever we are *able* to think about anything, however we "name" it, we are always isolating it. We are separating it out in contrast to a background that is "not it." "Emptiness" means that if we bracket the particular desires compelling us to divide the world up in this way, nothing is truly independent, and therefore nothing is any single particular thing, any single particular way or other. Nor is it the exclusion of being any single way or thing, for that would be to be another definitive thing. What is it, then? It is ambiguous. Not that we're seeing it wrongly. Not that we don't yet know what it is and therefore it appears unclear to us. It is itself unclear. It is itself neither one way nor another. That sounds strange, but it is just another way of saying what sounds much less surprising: it is in its own intrinsic being connected to everything else; everything is relevant to what it is.

Okay, so everything is connected to everything else, so much so that they are inseparable. Let's say I saw the leg off this chair. Didn't I just separate the leg from the rest of the chair? Yes. But the question is, Did I separate it from *all other things*? No. In fact, we think of things as separable from each other because we can, so it seems, *move them around*. But to separate any item from the things to which it is connected *always* means *to connect it to something else*! This chair leg can never exist in a vacuum; wherever it goes, there will be something else around it. It will be in contact with something or other. What happens then? It is no longer the same thing! The chair leg is now a stick. We must remember

here again not to be deceived by the idea that things were made for *one* particular purpose. Looking at the chair leg lying on the ground, I may indeed think, *Ah, there is a severed chair leg.* But this is because a chair is a manufactured artifact, made for a purpose, designed by human beings. We are thinking of it in terms of only one of its causes, the one that usually matters most to us. But as we have seen, nothing is brought into being by one cause only. In identifying it in this way, we are narrowing our awareness of the complexity, the multifariousness of this object, due to our habit of seeing it that way, motivated by our desire for an object that is useful to us. Imagine that if you broke off the chair leg, it immediately ceased to exist—vanished immediately! That would be a little closer to the way things are in our universe. But more correctly, imagine that if I cut off the leg of a chair, it instantly transformed into a bird, or a trombone, or a watermelon, or a clock.

That is how it is: whenever we remove something from some connection, we connect it with something else, and this *changes its identity*. If I cut off my foot, it soon ceases to be a foot; it becomes meat for worms and within a matter of months is no longer recognizable. It has been disconnected from my body, which alone made it a "foot," and is connected instead with the earth, the air, the worms, making it "meat" and then "energy" and so on. Although it takes some time for me to notice this change in its identity, it is going on every second. For every second, things are changing around each thing, since it is not sustained by any single set of causes. That means its connections are changing. That means *it* is changing.

We begin to see another way things are "impermanent" and how this is a function of their necessary interconnection, for it is not only because things are composed of parts, of "other" things, that there is a necessary involvement of "otherness" in what any thing is. If we look at them temporally, we notice that "a previous moment" is also involved in any "present state." That is another way of saying they are causally determined. But most of all, things are what they are as a function of their connection to other things both inside themselves and outside themselves. All things, in fact, are making them what they are. Each thing is the tip of an iceberg—and the iceberg is all other things. But those things are in the same boat! The word for this sort of necessary otherness is *context*.

It is this, the *this/that* approach, that will be of most importance in the distinctively Tiantai treatment of Emptiness, which will lead us *beyond* Emptiness, revising the implications of the doctrine decisively. In Tiantai, as we'll soon see, wholesale surreal transformation of identity from moment to moment is not the whole story. Rather, the Emptiness theory will be developed and turned inside out so that it entails not just impermanence but also permanence, not just discontinuity but also continuity. To appreciate how this can be so, we need to first consider another piece of the Mahāyāna puzzle, the scripture that Tiantai has traditionally identified as the epitome of its teaching, somewhat to the consternation and bafflement of many students of Tiantai thought: the *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*, better known in English as the *Lotus Sūtra*.

FOUR

BUDDHA-NATURE AND ORIGINAL ENLIGHTENMENT

SO! THERE ARE NO THINGS! THERE ARE NO DEFINITIVE, either/or "states"! There is no such thing as a "state" of suffering! Madness, eh? Even if this madness is what is really taught in something called Mahāyāna Buddhism, does such madness really do us any good? Doesn't it rather threaten to undermine any notion of what "doing us any good" could possibly mean? Where is it all leading? We may have to wait until we get to the unexpected applications of these ideas in Tiantai thought to a get stronger sense of how all these strange moves lead us somewhere quite novel, perhaps somewhere that might end up being very worth going in surprising ways. But for now let's move on. What about Nirvana, the cessation of suffering, the absence of suffering? Isn't that where all this Buddhism stuff is supposed to "lead us"? Obviously that is going to have to be reconceived here too.

WHATEVER IS, IS NOT NIRVANA

Here is a typical description of Nirvana in early Buddhist texts:

> There is that dimension where there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor wind; neither dimension of the infinitude of space, nor dimension of the infinitude of consciousness, nor dimension of nothingness, nor dimension of neither perception nor non-perception; neither this world, nor the next world, nor sun, nor moon. And there, I say, there is neither coming, nor going, nor staying; neither passing away nor arising: unestablished, unevolving, without support (mental object). This, just this, is the end of stress.[1]
>
> Where water, earth,
> fire, & wind

> have no footing:
> There the stars don't shine,
> the sun isn't visible.
> There the moon doesn't appear.
> There darkness is not found.
> And when a sage,
> a brahman through sagacity,
> has realized [this] for himself,
> then from form & formless,
> from bliss & pain,
> he is freed.[2]

> There is, monks, an unborn—unbecome—unmade—unfabricated. If there were not that unborn—unbecome—unmade—unfabricated, there would not be the case that escape from the born—become—made—fabricated would be discerned. But precisely because there is an unborn—unbecome—unmade—unfabricated, escape from the born—become—made—fabricated is discerned. . . . One who is dependent has wavering. One who is independent has no wavering. There being no wavering, there is calm. There being calm, there is no yearning. There being no yearning, there is no coming or going. There being no coming or going, there is no passing away or arising. There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here nor a there nor a between-the-two. This, just this, is the end of stress.[3]

Anything you can point out, identify, conceptualize, mention, consider is not Nirvana. If anything is mentioned as a candidate for what Nirvana is, that thing is thereby proved not to be Nirvana. Nirvana is "neither this nor that." It is the unconditioned. All definite descriptions ("soil" versus "water," "fire" versus "wind," and so on) are "conditioned." Fire is only present where—and only where—there is not water. Fire is present "on the condition that" water is not present. Water is only present "on the condition that" fire is not present. What is dependent on neither the one nor the other, on neither this nor that, is conditioned by neither the absence nor the presence of fire, and equally by neither the absence nor the presence of water. And so for every other contrast, and therefore for anything at all that can be said, because every description singles out something in contrast to something else. So Nirvana is necessarily left undescribed, except to say that it is "unformed," unconditioned, the pure negation of everything that might be said or thought about it. Rather than try to describe it or understand it, we are to pull the arrow out, hop aboard the raft, and go see.

This is where our strange question arises. If Nirvana is "unconditioned," it has to be omnipresent. It also has to be happening all the time. For if there were any "conditions" under which Nirvana were not occurring, Nirvana would be conditioned. It would be conditioned by the absence of those conditions. So if Nirvana only begins when we free ourselves of some particular states—mental delusions, greed, anger—then Nirvana is not really unconditional. If Nirvana is the result of doing anything, it is by definition conditional. But what is conditional is dependent, and what is dependent is impermanent and involves suffering, and is therefore not Nirvana. The question, then, is again this one: can Nirvana actually start at some particular moment in time?

Early Buddhism seems to say it can. We want to get from *here*, our life of suffering and conditionality, to *there*, Nirvana, the end of suffering, the unconditioned. But ultimately this becomes one of those questions like those posed by the archery victim. The claim that our experience of Nirvana "begins" or "is attained" must be regarded merely as another "raft": something that is useful, an effective tool, but not a description of how things are. Note in the above passage that the neither-nor denial of all characteristics of Nirvana is finally pushed to the point of undermining its original status as "the other shore," as opposed to "this shore": "There is neither this shore, nor another shore, nor something between them." This tells us that the "other shore" metaphor was just that, a metaphor, and is to be discarded along with all the other twigs composing our raft. The contrast between "this world" and "the other shore," after all, would be another dualism, which would mean dependence, conditionality, impermanence, and suffering.

Early Buddhism is content to leave things there. But we see here an opening for the development of another approach, taken by many schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism, of which the Tiantai school is a part. The most important ideas of the Mahāyāna for our purposes here are (1) Emptiness and the Twofold Truth; (2) the simultaneous copresence of the unconditioned and the conditioned; and (3) the bodhisattva path. We have discussed the first of these in the previous chapter. Let us briefly consider the second and third of these key Mahāyāna ideas now.

NIRVANA IS WHATEVER IS: ORIGINAL ENLIGHTENMENT

Nirvana is unconditioned. That means it can never start or stop. If it started at moment M, for example, it would be conditioned: the necessary condition for its presence would be "the fact that moment M has arrived." It would be dependent on time having marched to this point. Then it would be dependent, unfree, impermanent, suffering. It would be something to be desired, attached to, sought, which might either be the case or not be the case. It would be a further cause of suffering.

Some Mahāyāna Buddhist schools, cognizant of this problem, assert that the unconditioned is ever present, always going on, no matter what conditions are present. Rather than a "neither-nor," we have a "both-and"; it is neither heat nor cold, but rather what is omnipresent in both heat and cold. But even the "in" is not appropriate here. When one thing is "in" another, we tend to still think of them as two separate things. A marble is hidden inside a bag. But the marble is the marble and the bag is the bag; where the bag is, the marble is not, and where the marble is, the bag is not. That would still make them conditional: each would be there only on the condition that the other was not. Mahāyāna scriptures tell us that Nirvana—the unconditioned—*is* samsara—the world of suffering, conditionality, impermanence. Some scriptures use terms like "Buddha-nature" or "Tathāgatagarbha" ("womb or embryo of the Buddha"), or even "Original Enlightenment," for this ever present unconditional *aspect* of all states and experiences. "Aspect" is perhaps a closer word for what is meant here. An "aspect" is not a part. An aspect is not "within" something; it is the way the whole thing looks when viewed in a certain way or from a certain perspective.

How can Nirvana—defined only as the precise opposite of every possible image, idea, object, state—be an aspect of every possible image, idea, object, and state? The answer lies within the problem itself. When we hear that Nirvana is "not this, not that, not anything else," we tend to inadvertently form an image in our minds: an image of complete blankness. We mentally remove red, blue, hot, cold, round, square, pleasure, pain, and every other particular state we can image. We are left with an empty screen, blank space, an infinity of blackness or of

whiteness. But undifferentiated whiteness is also something. Undifferentiated blackness is also something. A blank screen is also something. Even nothingness is "something," since nothingness is conceived as the opposite of what exists. Nirvana cannot be blankness, cannot be nothingness, cannot be a state of total devoidness of all characteristics. What is the definition of "something"? It is very simple: it is whatever is able to *exclude* something *else*. Blankness, nothingness have the power to exclude something—in fact, they exclude everything: red, green, round, square, hot, cold, happy, sad, all are excluded. Nirvana cannot be any one of these. But it also cannot be "not-red"—that too is "something." It cannot be "not-green," "not-round," "not square," "not-hot," "not-cold," "not-happy," "not-sad." For to *exclude* any particular state is to *be* a particular state: the state of not being that way. Nirvana is no particular state. Therefore it cannot exclude any particular state. All possible states therefore can be includable within Nirvana, can be expressions of Nirvana, versions of Nirvana.

If we must find an image with which to visualize this, we should imagine not a blank, not an unending expanse of blackness, not an unmarked white wall, but something like a mirror. A blank wall has no color. A mirror has no color. But the blank wall's "no color" is actually a color: white. This is what allows it to exclude green and blue and orange and yellow. A mirror's "no color," on the other hand, is no *particular* color, but for that very reason it can be any color. Nirvana is "nothing" in the latter sense—its nothingness is also everything; its everything is also nothing. It *can be* anything, and therefore it *is*—definitively—nothing.

But note that we say "*can be*" includable in, expressions of, versions of Nirvana, rather than simply "*are*" versions of Nirvana. Why? Because to simply "be" Nirvana would make them a specific state that excludes something—namely, the opposite state, the state of "not being Nirvana." All states are neither Nirvana nor suffering, but are susceptible to being viewed as either, or as both. Nirvana never begins or ends. But it's never just "there" either. As the Mahāyāna texts like to say, it neither comes nor goes, but neither does it *dwell* or *abide*. For to dwell or abide, to just be there, is to have some particular characteristic, which would be to be determinate, to be conditioned, requiring a contrast to somewhere or something it is "not." That would mean to be a "thing," to exclude

something. But Nirvana is, strictly, everywhere and nowhere. Nirvana too is "empty"—ambiguous.

EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE: "LIKE SPACE"

Everywhere and nowhere! This is why Nirvana, the Mahāyāna tells us, is "like space"! And all dharmas, all elements of experience, are also "like space"! They are everywhere and nowhere, like space is.

Let's pause to notice just how strange the whole idea of "space" really is. I don't intend to bring up all the brand-new weirdnesses about space that have entered the conversations of modern physics. There's plenty of unnoticed weirdness already in the commonsense notion of space, which the relativistic and quantum amplifications of the notion of space perhaps build up, extend, and seek to resolve.

To start with, try this: imagine that there is no such thing as "space." Imagine no space. Remove "space" from your list of things that exist, and try to imagine whatever is left. It can't be done. When we try to imagine something as "gone," we imagine a "space" where that thing used to be. If we try to imagine "space" as "gone," we have no choice, it seems, but to imagine a "space" where "space" used to be. But that just retains space. It does not get rid of it as we had planned. It seems that the removal of space only leaves—more space!

But do we really imagine space when we imagine something "gone"? Perhaps we imagine some other thing in place of the original thing. One thing can be pushed out by another thing. I can imagine my coffee cup gone from my table not only by imagining space there but also by imagining, say, a bowl of soup there instead. Now consider this: when the coffee cup is in position X, is "space" also there in position X? Or is "space" also "pushed out" when I place my coffee cup there on the table? If space is pushed out by my coffee cup, does the space move over into the next position like displaced air? What does it move "into"? Does the total volume of space in my room increase when I bring home a new coffee cup? When the room gets more full of more things? Or does the space get somehow more tightly packed in the remaining empty regions? Or spill out the windows? It is clear that when we think of "space" we are thinking of something very different from displaced air. Where are those

air molecules, after all? What do they "move around" in? What is the medium "in which" anything can be placed?

It seems instead that we think of space as that which accepts, allows, things to be placed in it. All things are *in* space; they do not *displace* space. Space is, if you will, the *allowing* of things. It is not that there is space on the one hand and the things that fill space on the other. When I put my coffee cup down on the table, it does not displace that space there: it "fills" that space, it is "in" that space. The space remains unmoved. Whether filled or empty, the "same" space is there. We must therefore modify our first sense of the meaning of "space." Originally it meant all the places that are empty, as opposed to the places that are full of something. There was a *contrast* there between the blank spots and the full spots, and we called the blank ones, the places into which fullnesses could move, the places we could enter, "space." But what is fullness? Isn't it a set of identifiable characteristics? I am passing my hand through the space in the table, where it moves *unobstructed*. Then I come to something round, hard, hot, solid: my coffee cup. But both of these are experiences of something, of a certain noticeable character: in the first region there was the character of smooth, unobstructed movement, or the ability to allow a thing in; in the second region there was hotness, roundness, solidness, obstruction. So I really have two regions that are "filled" in different ways, with different kinds of characteristics. What would be left if these characteristics were to be removed, if "passability" were taken from the first region and "impassability" from the second? Does each of these types of characteristics then occupy a space? If so, this space would be equally present whether "allowing" in itself "passability" or "impassability." For any space we posit, in contrast to where there is no space, there is a further space in which the two contrasted entities must be placed in order to be there. The very idea of space necessitates a further space which is neither (first-order) space nor nonspace. Space, by definition, pervades all times and places, whether there is "space" there or not.

Are the regions of space really separate, then? The characteristics of these regions are certainly different, and this is how we distinguish them—and note too that it is only through this initial, though now transcended, contrast of the empty and the filled that we ever arrived at a

notion of that which can be empty or filled, which is thus indistinguishable between them. But are the spaces that "space" and "filled" regions occupy themselves different? No, because otherwise we would have an infinite regress, since to be different they would have to be "filled" with some characteristic, which would then again need a space to occupy, and so on ad infinitum. But can two indistinguishable things—like the regions full of stuff and the empty regions—actually be different? How do we know where one begins and another ends? Don't they, then, collapse into each other? What sense would it make to say that two things are different when we can find absolutely no way to distinguish them from each other? It will not do even to say that they are the same except that they are positioned in different "regions" relative to one another. What are these regions? What is this distancing and spacing of different regions? Space, perhaps?

Could there be any space *without* empty and full regions? That is, just "empty" space, forever, unrelenting? Or is there something about space itself that requires that there be both empty and full regions, in contrast to each other? We have seen that without these contrasts, we could never arrive at the idea of space; we start to think of space by noticing that, in addition to the particular things we are involved with, there are also these seemingly "blank" areas that separate them. But this is not just a question of our noticing. It would literally be meaningless to speak of space without this contrast. There would be no meaning to "space." For space to be space, it must be capable of allowing something that initially appears to be other than space into itself. For without something that fills regions of space, there is no such thing as space. Without this otherness, space would not be space. Space would not be space if the alternation of filled and empty were removed. Space as space requires both the contrast *and* the overcoming of the contrast. Space, then, *is* all the things in space—all of them express "spaciousness," the nature of space, in various different ways. It is built into the nature of space as space that there be some things there—whether that means one thing, some things, or precisely these things (a matter we will return to in the discussion of Tiantai proper). But it "is" these things in a peculiar form: in the form of requiring both the contrast to them and the subsequent overcoming of this contrast!

Space is not excludable. Whatever we put into space, space is still there. If we remove space, space is still there; it is what is as present in its absence as in its presence. The absence of space is just more space.

Is space, then, "present"? What does it mean to be present? It would seem that in order to have any meaning, presence must be somehow distinguishable from absence. But this is not the case with space. What is the characteristic of space by which we could notice that it is present rather than absent? No-hotness, no-roundness, no-solidity—that is space. Hotness, roundness, solidity—that is space too. What is the spaceness that is present when space is present? Space is the allowing of characteristics. But wherever there are any characteristics of any kind, those characteristics have been allowed, and thus space is there. But this kind of "thereness" is no different from "not-thereness." Space does not abide anywhere. Space has no specific characteristic. Space has no self-nature. Space is "empty." There is no such "thing" as space.

Mahāyāna Buddhism says that Nirvana is like space. The Mahāyāna Sūtra called *The Nirvana Sūtra* says that the Buddha-nature is like space. Many Mahāyāna texts, including the *Lotus Sūtra*, say that all dharmas, all elements of experience, are themselves like space. What is space like? It is nowhere and everywhere. If this is true of all experiences, then every experience is nowhere and everywhere, has never begun and never ceased, is neither present nor absent. What is it? Empty—that is, ambiguous; that is, findable everywhere, but not *having* to be found anywhere in particular. Like space, it is present always also as its absence, as the presence of the something *else*. What, then, is the state of suffering? Not a "state," but a spacelike nowhere-everywhere. What, then, is the state of the cessation of suffering? Not a "state" at all, it turns out, but rather a spacelike nowhere-everywhere. This has enormous human implications, which we will now begin to explore.

THE MILK MEDICINE

"Buddha-nature" is the term often used for this all-pervasive but never unambiguously present reality. Although "Buddha-nature" is often described as simply "the potential" to someday achieve Buddhahood, it actually means much more than that. It means the Buddhahood that

is always already present, no matter what is going on, no matter when, no matter where. Early Buddhism described all phenomena as "impermanent," "nonself," "suffering," and, sometimes, "impure" (i.e., defiling and never unmixed). The *Nirvana Sūtra* describes the Buddha-nature as the precise opposite of all four of these: as permanent, self, joyful, and pure. Just like Nirvana as presented in the old pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings, Buddha-nature is simply the precise opposite of all conditioned phenomena. But now, as permanent, it is understood to have no beginning and no end: it is always there, whatever is happening. Buddha-nature is the preexistent, always already present Nirvana, the Nirvana already in all things. And it is even what Nirvana never was, even in early Buddhism: "self"—the big taboo throughout all of Buddhism! How can this be? This seems to make Buddha-nature simply another word for the universal self, Brahman, the emphatic rejection of which by Buddhism was really all that made Buddhism Buddhism rather than a weirdly evasive form of Hinduism or pantheism! Is this correct?

In that same *Nirvana Sūtra* the Buddha tells a story meant to answer this question. I will paraphrase it here and embellish it a little to make the point more clear. Once upon a time there was a kingdom whose people were beset by all sorts of illnesses. The king hired a famous physician to develop a "health care program" for his people. Unfortunately, so the story goes, this doctor was really nothing more than a mercenary quack. No matter what sort of problem anyone had, he would prescribe the same remedy: a highly addictive compound made from milk, the Milk Medicine. Headache? Milk Medicine. Cancer? Milk Medicine. Broke your leg? Milk Medicine. Going blind? Milk Medicine. We can imagine that this Milk Medicine was at once an opiate, a placebo, and a snake-oil phony panacea. Because it was intoxicating, it seemed to help, but actually it only made things worse. Because it was addictive, the demand for it grew and grew: people really did feel worse if they didn't get their Milk Medicine. This went on for years, and the king gradually started to notice that the health of his people was actually getting worse.

Well, one day a new doctor came to town—representing the Buddha, of course. He told the king that the old doctor was a quack. The king fired the old doctor and hired the new one. "The first principle of my new health program," said the new doctor, "is that the Milk Medicine is

now illegal! The Milk Medicine is poison! It is what is ruining everyone's health!" Thenceforth the Milk Medicine was outlawed, vilified, and no longer available. The people gradually started to overcome their addiction to it, although this was a painful process. Then the new doctor began to give them specific cures for their specific ailments: a certain herb for your headache; another kind of treatment for your cancer; a cast and bed rest for your broken leg; some surgery for your blindness. Each treatment was different, because each ailment was different. But they had one thing in common: no Milk Medicine! Avoid the Milk Medicine at all costs!

The health of the populace was now in good shape. But one day the king himself became sick—an odd illness, a severe illness came upon him. He called for his physician. The doctor examined him and finally made his prescription: "There is only one cure for this disease," he said. "Milk Medicine!"

The king was shocked: "Didn't you say this was poison? The one thing to always be avoided? The worst possible treatment for every disease?"

The doctor replied: "The Milk Medicine is poison when it is applied indiscriminately, as a panacea. It is poison if it is given constantly, creating an addiction. It is poison if it becomes a crutch that masks the true nature of the illness and therefore prevents any fundamental cure. But there is indeed an appropriate use for the Milk Medicine—if and only if the system has been thoroughly cleansed of the accumulated effects of its long-term overuse. The application of this medicine, at the right time, as part of a comprehensive health program that also involves long abstention from it, is sometimes the only cure. Right now, it is only Milk Medicine that can cure you."[4]

The Milk Medicine in this story symbolizes the teaching of permanence, of selfhood, of preexistent and omnipresent bliss: the Buddha-nature teaching. The bad doctor represents the teachers of soul, of God, of Brahman, of the eternal and omnipresent, as a panacea, as a crutch, as an addictive drug used to cover over every particular ailment. Used this way, this teaching of true selfhood is poison. Buddhism prohibits this teaching as the good doctor prohibits the use of Milk Medicine, for a time. The system must be cleared, individual ailments understood and separately addressed, the addiction to the thought of the eternal as a covering over of all the ills of the mind, and the world must be broken

through. But in the end there is a time when this medicine is appropriate. A good doctor is a doctor who does not give the same medicine for all diseases, but who sees what is necessary for each case. This is of course the principle of the "raft," again, the idea of *upāya*, or skillful means, which we will discuss further in the next chapter. As part of the overall skillful practice of medicine, the Milk Medicine is indispensable. When is the right time for it? When it has been long excluded. When our systems have been cleansed of it. When is the right time for the teaching of selfhood, of permanence? *When the teaching of nonself and impermanence have been thoroughly established*! Selfhood and permanence are only "true," only effective, *on the premise* that we have already seen and accepted that all things are without self, that all things are empty. Selfhood is only true *in conjunction with* the teaching of nonself and Emptiness. The *Nirvana Sūtra* compares them to two birds that must always stay together, whether perched or flying. We may say they are two wings of the same bird. In isolation, either teaching is insufficient.

This gives us a criterion by which to understand a true and wholesome teaching of a "permanent self" and distinguish it from a false and unwholesome one. The wholesome teaching of a permanent self *must be at the same time a teaching of nonself*. That is, it must be something that we could equally validly describe *either as self or as nonself, either as permanent or impermanent*. If what we have in mind is something that is permanent but not impermanent, or impermanent but not permanent, or self but not nonself, or nonself but not self, that is not the Buddha-nature. The Buddha-nature is permanent in a way that could just as well, in other contexts, be called impermanent; it is self in a way that could just as well be called nonself. What could that be?

We have already seen one example: space. Space is neither permanent nor impermanent, is both permanent and impermanent, is nowhere as everywhere, is everywhere as nowhere. Is space impermanent? No, because it can never be destroyed: filled or removed, what we have is still space. Is it permanent? No, because it is not any one particular characteristic that is found everywhere. There is not anything "there" to be permanent. Wherever we seek space, we always find only something else—passability, impassability, this, that, something that could be removed and still leave space behind—so none of these things are the

unique distinguishing mark of what space is. We never find just "space." It is nowhere and/or everywhere. It is permanent and/or impermanent. It is self and/or nonself. No wonder we are told that the Buddha-nature is like space.

Space must have at least one thing in it to be space, one optional characteristic, even if that one characteristic is just passability. But must it have exactly what it does have? All this variety, all these worlds, all these experiences, of you and I and all beings? Must there be world in space, experience, this experience we are having right now? We are still not sure if we can say that space, that Buddhahood, that all phenomena are also nothing and everything. Tiantai Buddhism says yes: all of our experiences are built into the nature of space, all are present-absent, permanent-impermanent in the same way. For "space" is actually no particular specifiable thing; it is not some particular characteristic one could point to that is unchangeable, that must be appearing with a certain set of attributes everywhere, or even anywhere. For the very same reason that all things share this nature of "space," are all of one nature, this one nature is no specifiable nature at all. Because although a space may be unchangeable and present everywhere, since space is equally whatever else is present *in* space, space need not be present anywhere at all as space itself; it might be present *only* as all other things. There is no space one could point to that is unconditioned and present everywhere, that can be found under all conditions, except in the form of other things. The great Tiantai writer Zhanran provides a useful metaphor: "It is like the images of flowers in the sky. There is no difference in substance between the flowers and the empty sky. But this empty sky does not match either the name of 'flower' or the name of 'empty sky,' for the latter was originally posited in contradistinction to the flowers. This emptiness has no name. You should carefully extend this comparison in detail—it applies to all things."[5]

Once we see that it is everywhere without exception, we cannot use the name "empty sky" as a determinate name for the unconditional that pervades all places in the sky, even the putative flowers, because this discernible name was posited in contrast to the filled-in spaces, the flowers. Once these filled-in spaces are seen to be identical, because the objects doing the filling in are in their substance also empty sky, "empty

sky" is no longer a legitimate name for this nature, since it has nothing with which to be contrasted. As Zhanran says, this is the very essence of Tiantai thinking, applying to everything. Precisely by succeeding in pervading, this determinate item—in this case, sky—is no longer that which is pervading; it annuls itself by its very success. So whatever name, characteristic, essence, or "nature" is chosen for "the nature" ipso facto ceases to be a legitimate name for the nature. One nature is no nature. No specific nature can be the one unconditioned nature, and at the same time any particular coherence that appears in experience must be the entirety of this one nature. Hence Zhanran concludes that each function is the entirety of the spacelike Buddha-nature, is in fact all three thousand quiddities appearing *as* this particular thing. Every moment of experience, of every living creature, is everywhere and nowhere, is everything and nothing.

To understand how and why this is so, however, we need to add another element: time. We must understand what time looks like, "empty" time, time without self-nature. For that we need to turn to the *Lotus Sūtra*.

FIVE

HOW TO NOT KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING

Introduction to the *Lotus Sūtra*

LET'S SUPPOSE, FOR THE MOMENT, THAT YOU HAVE ACCEPTED what we've been suggesting in the previous few chapters: it's impossible to really say anything meaningful about what anything "is" in the ultimate sense. Would you, then, also be willing to say that it is equally impossible to know what's *happening* to you right now? A bit harder to swallow, perhaps. But how about this: would you be willing to say that it is equally impossible to know what you are yourself really *doing* right now?

Common sense, morality, human dignity—all of these instinctively have a strong need to say definitively that it is *not* impossible to know what I am doing right now. "Of course," they say in unison, "there is a right answer to 'what am I doing?' It is what I intend to do! If there weren't, the consequences would be terrible, wouldn't they?" I say I'm standing here minding my own business browsing in a bookstore. I have no intention to harm anyone or to cause any trouble. But what if a paranoid enemy showed up insisting that it was a horrible crime that I'm committing here and now? Anyone who's been in a dysfunctional relationship will surely have had a similar experience: my innocent remark is interpreted as a malicious attack or a subtle dig; I'm innocently sitting here watching the football game, but suddenly I'm told that I'm deliberately sabotaging a conversation. An argument ensues: I had no such intention! I am innocent! I meant no harm! Surely no one would want to sacrifice his or her right to be the arbiter of the meaning of his or her own actions. Even the law takes into account the intention behind our actions—the punishment for inadvertent harm is much lighter than premeditated malice.

But Tiantai Buddhism says no to this treasured trope of common sense. Not because, deep down, you "really were" sabotaging the conversation. Just the contrary: there is no "really were" that pertains to this question any more than to any other question. What applies to all possible things also applies to your intention right now, to your mind: it is not a "thing." This does not mean it is some kind of otherworldly, insubstantial, spirit-like entity. It means that it is empty of self-nature. It means that it is, in its own nature, ambiguous. What you are thinking, intending, doing can never be just one thing, can never have just one meaning. Who you are, the story in which you are embedded, what you're actually accomplishing by doing what you're doing right now—that is something you are in no position to know, because there is no single answer to be known about it.

This is where the *Lotus Sūtra* comes in. It is the *Lotus Sūtra* that draws this conclusion: you are in no position to know what you're doing. Thus far this is perhaps quite logical if the Emptiness idea is accepted. Since there is no "way things are," unambiguously, whatever you think about what's happening right now, or what you are doing right now, cannot be the sole and complete truth about it. This is already pretty shocking!

But it gets worse! It would be one thing to say, "Neither you nor anyone else is in any position to know what you or anyone else is doing." That would be the logical extension of the Emptiness doctrine. But that is not quite what the *Lotus Sūtra* says, it seems. Is anybody in the position to know what you are doing? At first glance the *Lotus Sūtra* seems to say that there is: the Buddha. This is even more shocking! Be offended! Be very offended! Here is a passage that drives home both sides of this point:

> The teachings preached by the Tathāgata [i.e., the Buddha] are all of one mark and one flavor, what is known as the mark of liberation, the mark of freedom, the mark of cessation. And ultimately all these teachings lead to the Knowledge of All Modes [i.e., the Buddha's own state of perfect enlightenment]. When a sentient being hears any of these preachings of the Tathāgata, or remembers or reads or recites or practices them, the merit he thereby gains is unknown to himself. And why? Because only the Tathāgata knows what the type, attributes, essence, and nature of a sentient being is, what he is thinking of, what he is cogitating, what he is practicing; how he is thinking, how he is cogitating, how he is practicing; by virtue of what

> dharma he is thinking, cogitating, or practicing, and by what dharma he is attaining what dharma. Only the Tathāgata knows without obstruction, accurately, and clearly what stage a sentient being may be dwelling in.[1]

The *Lotus Sūtra* is something of a riddle among Mahāyāna scriptures. Upon opening this book, particularly after learning of the immense significance given to it in some Buddhist traditions (and above all by its own relentless self-praise!), first-time readers, and many longtime readers, will almost certainly react much as the Japanese Zen Master Hakuin did: What's all this about being the "King of Sūtras"? This is just a bunch of muddled parables and tall tales! It doesn't seem to include any actual—how shall we say?—*teachings*! There's the declaration that the Buddhas appear in the world for one purpose only, but, then, what *is* that purpose? Something about the knowledge and experience of a Buddha, but it never tells us what *that* is. It tells us that the Buddhas all appear for one reason, but it never seems to tell us what the reason is. It has been called, with some justice and considerable wit, a long prologue without a book: talking again and again about a teaching called "The *Lotus Sūtra*" and how amazing it is, and then—we never get the teaching, so it seems. It is a book about a book called itself, and rather than have an amazing content, its content is just to tell us how amazing the content of this book is and all the things it does. There are some passing, offhand references to hard-core Emptiness theory, sure: in chapter 2 we have the assertion that "from the beginning all dharmas have been the attributes of Nirvana"—that is, of quiescence, of Emptiness—but it is nothing compared to the detailed exposition and elaboration of crisscrossing implications and variations of this theme you get in other Mahāyāna sūtras. There is none of the profound philosophizing we typically find in Mahāyāna texts, none of the mind-bending paradoxes, none of the rigorous rational analysis, none of the strict adherence to empirical reality. Instead we find the Buddha exalted to the place of an eternal divinity, the "owner of the world," "the father of the world"—almost as obnoxiously bloated and self-absorbed and status-obsessed as the monotheistic God, lording it over everyone else, demanding constant praise and admiration, and claiming to watch over the world like a big Nobodaddy in the sky, playing favorites for those who "uphold" this sūtra, which the Buddhas "guard and protect": all the worst kind of tribal favoritism and universal

surveillance that define the type of religiosity of which Buddhism was always a refreshing rejection. Here he is even threatening dire trouble to anyone who doesn't believe what he's saying—that is, who hears but does not accept the *Lotus Sūtra* itself. Here he is fomenting the superiority of one religious view to any other and attaching it to allegiance with this very text. Surely here Buddhism has finally lost itself! Buddhism has become, so it seems, just another praise-and-reward, our-team-has-a-bigger-god religion.

And yet the Tiantai tradition has long claimed to derive its distinctive teaching of the Three Truths and the Interpenetration of the Three Thousand Dharmas from this sūtra. For many this has been an even bigger riddle. What does this weird and disappointing little text have to do with these apparently abstruse and, who knows, maybe even profound doctrines?

Actually, it turns out, the *Lotus Sūtra does* have a teaching. It can be stated in one sentence, from chapter 2: "The Buddha said: Buddhas teach only bodhisattvas." That's it. From that and that alone we can derive all the implications of Tiantai thought, and all the strange twists and turns of the *Lotus Sūtra*, as well as come to understand its very strange self-presentation: that is, that all the Buddha's students are bodhisattvas; that is, everyone the Buddha teaches something to is a bodhisattva; that is, you, whom the Buddha is teaching this fact that everyone he teaches is a bodhisattva, are ipso facto a bodhisattva. But to understand this seemingly vapid statement and its profound implications, we must pause to consider two things: (1) the implications of the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth, of past and future lives, of multiple lifetimes; and (2) the idea of the bodhisattva in the Mahāyāna. From there we can come to see the implications this has for the idea of *time* and from there to the Tiantai understanding of the human condition.

THE IRRELEVANCE OF TRANSMIGRATION

The Emptiness doctrine actually relegates causality to the status of merely "conventional truth." The very idea of "one cause" or "some finite and determinable set of causes" leading to "one determinate outcome" cannot be taken as a literal representation of some actual state

of affairs, since "one cause" or "one finite and determinable set" are, in terms of Emptiness, invalid concepts. Rationalistically inclined Buddhist fellow travelers sometimes take solace in this: that superstitious, empirically improvable doctrine of transmigration and rebirth is therefore regarded, in Buddhism itself, as something that is not ultimately true. And this is correct. But it must be noted that the idea of transmigration is thus regarded as no more and no less true than the claim that there is a table in this room, that the earth is round, that 2 + 2 = 4. All of these, and the doctrine of rebirth, are conventional truths. All of them are relegated to a status of secondary importance by the Emptiness doctrine. But this leaves them all more or less as they ever were. They are not changed or refuted by Emptiness, merely bracketed. So a rationalistic Buddhist could indeed take some solace here: whether these doctrines are true or false, whether or not the ancient Buddhists were mistaken about them, at least we can say that not much was riding on the truth or falsehood of these things; what really mattered was insight into Emptiness.

The *Lotus Sūtra*, on the other hand, goes the other way entirely; it seems to be almost exclusively obsessed with past lives and future lives, which are now given a new importance—the whole doctrine depends on them—while Emptiness is barely mentioned, and when it is, it is not harped on to anything like the extent we find in many other Mahāyāna scriptures. The *Lotus Sūtra* takes the idea of limitless past and future lives completely seriously and rests almost everything it has to say on them. In fact, it takes this idea to the next level, to a new extreme. But ironically, in doing so, it changes the implication of this doctrine profoundly, in a way that the bracketing of the doctrine by the Emptiness idea never did. To understand this, we must consider the idea of rebirth in more detail.

The doctrine of transmigration may appear to be a kind of theory about the afterlife, like belief in heaven and hell. As such, one might regard it as a kind of comfort, as something that would take the edge off the fear of death: it means your death is not the end of you, that there is more life for you afterward, that you have had many lifetimes and will have many more. It must seem strange, therefore, that the religions of ancient India like Brahmanism, Jainism, and Buddhism, all of which

accept some version of the rebirth doctrine as a matter of course, without exception regard it as the opposite of a comfort. It is, rather, precisely the problem to be solved. Why?

Technically, Buddhism rejects the doctrine of "reincarnation," because it rejects the idea of a static eternal soul that could be put, unchanged, into a new body. Rather, some of the actions and tendencies of a particular being continue causally to affect the next birth, as a wave moving through water has a certain character that transfers through the water, although the water itself does not move forward, but merely goes up and down in place. Nor is the wave "the same" earlier and later. There need not even be any single identifiable thing that stays the same about it: size, speed, shape may all change. All that matters is the causal *continuity* of the prior wave and the later wave. All that matters is that they belong to the same causal narrative. They are elements in the sequence of one and the same story. The early Buddhist texts make a point of saying, "That future person is neither oneself nor another person." The Buddhist theory thus rejects the notion of a soul, but does accept some kind of empirically unavailable causal continuity: in addition to the story of the body born and decaying, there is a larger story of which my life is also a causal part. So in the Buddhist case we will use the term "rebirth" instead of "reincarnation." For our present purposes, however, the two terms amount to the same thing. For whether or not there is a soul involved, all the ancient Indian believers in a future life thought this was a terrible thing, which they were willing to devote their present life to escaping from. People often think this has something to do with "pessimism" and a negative view of life: no existence is better than existence. But that is not the point here at all.

The point is that even if completely true, this idea of transmigration, of rebirth, of reincarnation, is absolutely no comfort against the fear of death. For even if the doctrine is true, even if everything is just as these scriptures declare, you will have no memory of your present life. Just as you are now unsure whether there is an afterlife, you will, by hypothesis, be just as unsure then. You have been unsure of eternal life for all your lifetimes and will be for all the future lives you have. Your fear that the continuity of your consciousness is going to end at the moment of death is entirely true, because the continuity of your consciousness

is constituted by your memory of yourself and of your life. It has to do with what you *now* consider to be your own past.

Would you consent to be transformed instantaneously into another being who was much better in every way than you? Or at least who has everything you presently want? Stronger, healthier, more powerful, wealthier, with all the privileges and pleasures you currently wish for but cannot attain? What if the condition were this: you would have no memory at all of having been the person you are now? You would not remember having wished for this or having consented to the transformation.

This is what the Buddhists say happen to you when you die, even if your next birth is something great. Even if it's true, it really has very little to do with you. Would that better person be yourself improved or another person entirely? Have you continued to exist, or have you simply been replaced? There seems to be little reason for rejoicing if there is no clear-cut answer to this question, if there is never a moment when your survival of death can be experienced and confirmed.

The Christian or Muslim idea of the afterlife is something that believers claim will actually be *confirmed*: you die, and suddenly you find yourself there in heaven or in hell. You can then say to yourself, "A-ha, I was right about there being a heaven! Now I am there, just as I expected!" or, if you had been an unbeliever, "Whoa, it turns out they were right, there is a hell!" But in the Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain version, this moment never comes. Even when you are reborn, you don't know it. The doctrine of transmigration is never confirmed by experience—in fact, it never can be confirmed by experience. To be experiencing it would be, by definition, to not know for sure that you were experiencing it. Even if things are exactly as they say, your experience would be no different. It would be just like your experience right now: being alive and not being sure if there is an afterlife or not. That is what the afterlife will be like.

Would it be more of a comfort if without any memory you became—or were replaced by—someone who cared deeply about the same things you care about, had the same kinds of special skills you have acquired, and would be inclined to continue your work? This is also part of the Buddhist picture, and there is perhaps a little bit of comfort in this. But the reasons this matters to us reveal something important about this doctrine, for by the very same logic that makes this doctrine no real

comfort in the face of death, it seems to give us no reason to care about the fate of our "future selves." Why should we care about the well-being of this future person and do things now to ensure his well-being when he won't remember me at all and therefore certainly will not credit me for his successes nor blame me for his failures? Why should I care if he suffers or rejoices? The answer comes from a consideration of what it is that *now* makes us consider someone "else" to be an aspect of ourselves, or a part of the same narrative, an element of the same continuity of which we are a part.

Jerry Seinfeld put his finger on this seemingly absurd situation, which is nonetheless a part of our daily reality:

> I never get enough sleep. I stay up late at night, cause I'm Night Guy. Night Guy wants to stay up late. "What about getting up after five hours sleep?," oh that's Morning Guy's problem. That's not my problem, I'm Night Guy. I stay up as late as I want. So you get up in the morning, you're exhausted, groggy . . . oooh I hate that Night Guy! See, Night Guy always screws Morning Guy. There's nothing Morning Guy can do. The only thing Morning Guy can do is try and oversleep often enough so that Day Guy loses his job and Night Guy has no money to go out anymore.[2]

Why should Night Guy care about Morning Guy? Morning Guy is someone else. Being tired is Morning Guy's problem. The experience of staying up late is complete in itself; it seems to be completely uncontaminated by the grogginess of the next day.

These two experiences have nothing in common. But they seem to have some causal continuity: one is a cause of the other. But why should the cause care about the effect if the effect is something "other" than the cause, which it must be by definition (otherwise there is no causality!)? Do you remember having wished last night at a particular moment to be well rested this morning? Why would you have wished this? But the fact is that we often do. What appears to be our selfish care for ourselves, for our own future, according to Buddhist nonself theory, is actually already a kind of compassion for someone "else." And if we really want to push the point, we must take the Buddhist idea of "momentariness" into account, for you are a different person every single moment, according to the Buddha. Even in the short time between reaching out for the coffee cup and bringing it to your lips there have been countless billions

of births and deaths. So how did you get the "Reaching-for-the-Glass Guy" to care about the "Drinking Guy"? No matter how short a span we may wish to focus on, there is always a relation of otherness, of time, in any action. Thus even the most selfish action is really always done for someone "else": me in the very near future.

Selfishness, in other words, is really already a kind of very narrow compassion. If I am short-sighted, my compassion is extremely narrow: I only care about Five-Minutes-from-Now Guy. So I get drunker, and let Morning Guy worry about the hangover, which is his problem, not mine. If I'm a little more cautious, it just means my compassion extends a bit further: I want Morning Guy to not have it so bad. If I am prudent, my compassion extends still further, or perhaps leapfrogs selectively: I care about Five-Years-from-Now Guy, so I study and work instead of going out to get drunk; Twenty-Minutes-from-Now Guy and Tomorrow Guy can suffer for all I care, as long as Five-Years-from-Now Guy is happy!

We can see already that the dichotomy between selfishness and compassion cannot be absolute in a Buddhist context. Compassion is unavoidable; it is a necessary condition of all living beings, of all action, of all life. It's just a question of the range and criteria of its application.

So what does the doctrine of rebirth really amount to? We saw above that the experience of being reborn will be no different from not being reborn; it will just be being alive, with no knowledge or memory of past or future lives. The claim of rebirth is no comfort, because it claims no more than what you are experiencing right now. But in Buddhism there is one exception, only one experience where rebirth is actually confirmed: the experience of the Buddha. For the Buddha's enlightenment is traditionally said to involve two components: (1) insight into dependent co-arising, suffering, nonself, impermanence; and (2) a vision of the past lives and perhaps future rebirths of all living beings, including himself. This is the key to the whole problem here. Being a Buddha means to see some set of these past beings, a much larger set of past beings than previously, as past lives of himself. And this lived experience of the reality of rebirth occurs *only* to one who has simultaneously realized nonself, to one who no longer sees these past lives of himself as his self or as any self. Only the experience of the emptiness of selves allows one to see other selves as being as much oneself as one's present self—or rather, as *little*

oneself as one's present self, for these now mean exactly the same thing. To experience rebirth of the self is already to be beyond rebirth of the self, and, conversely, getting beyond rebirth of the self is what allows one to experience the infinity of one's own nonself selves. Emptiness is an experience of rebirth in all its vast multiplicity precisely because it is also a definitive experience of its non-literalness, its lack of ultimate reality.

In sum, rebirth is irrelevant, is no comfort, is no threat, as long as I do not regard other moments as versions of myself. It is never something that is just experienced and proved to be true; by definition, it never can be. Instead, its meaning derives entirely from my viewing it as such from the present moment. I have past lives and future lives to the exact extent that I regard myself as having past and future lives, for that is the only experience of rebirth that is possible. I can never experience those lives as myself in the present; in the present of those future rebirths, there is only forgetting of me now. The only experience of rebirth is to see past and future beings as versions of myself. It is experienced by nothing more and nothing less than seeing myself situated in a larger story, a larger continuity, a longer sequence of causes and effects, than I had. It can only be experienced in the present moment, as a view outward toward the past and future, an expansion of the range of one's concern or compassion to regard those other experiences as somehow "one's own." It is a function of the present moment to see itself as part of a larger context of infinite births and lives. But this is experienced only in Buddhahood. The Buddha is the one who escapes from rebirth. Yet in a certain way the Buddha is also the only one who ever experiences rebirth. *Escape* from rebirth is the only possible *experience* of rebirth.

THE BODHISATTVA

The word "bodhisattva" means "enlightenment-being." It is originally used in Buddhism to refer to a "Buddha-to-be." Originally, in the Pali sources, which are still central to Theravāda Buddhism, there is only one bodhisattva at a time; it refers to the past lives of Śākyamuni Buddha and his present life up to the moment he attained full enlightenment under the bodhi tree. When he attained enlightenment, he ceased being a bodhisattva. He became, instead, an *arhat*. He also became, of course,

a Buddha. We have to be clear on the implications of all these terms to understand what's going on in the Mahāyāna, in the *Lotus Sūtra*, and in Tiantai thought. Here's the story:

A Buddha is someone who *discovers* the truth about suffering: what it is, how to get rid of it. A Buddha is also someone who *declares and teaches* this truth to others.

When a Buddha teaches the way to end suffering, a bunch of people listen and learn that way. If they decide it makes sense, they become followers of the Buddha. These followers are called *śrāvakas*—literally, "voice-hearers," those who listen to the preaching of the Buddha. The śrāvakas practice according to this teaching in order to free themselves of suffering. When they have succeeded in doing so, they become arhats. An arhat is someone who has already reached complete Nirvana, the end of suffering, in this lifetime and will never be born again into this world of suffering, or any world, since all worlds, as worlds, are worlds of suffering. The Buddha Śākyamuni was called an arhat as well, for he had brought an end to suffering in himself and would never be born again. He was both an arhat and a Buddha.

Whenever a Buddha preaches, though, according to the original Buddhist mythology, there is one weird guy who does something completely different from the rest of the listeners. Like the rest of them, he can practice the way being taught by this Buddha and try to attain the end of suffering, arhatship, as soon as possible, possibly in this very lifetime. But instead he chooses to make a vow to become the next Buddha rather than an arhat. This means he will have to be reborn many times; he will need many more skills, many more virtues, much more accumulation of "merits," for the much bigger job of being a Buddha. In the *Jataka Tales* we have stories of the Buddha Śākyamuni's former lives as a bodhisattva: as a monkey, as a king, as a tiger, and so on, practicing self-sacrifice and compassion, gaining practical interactive wisdom in each of these many forms. All of these are part of the job he has taken on by choosing to go for Buddhahood rather than the short and direct path of arhatship. What is the difference?

Arhats and Buddhas both want the same thing: the end of suffering. And both of them do attain it, personally realize it; in their ending of suffering, there is no difference between them at all. The only differ-

ence is that a Buddha, in addition to realizing the end of suffering, also realizes the *method* to end suffering, discovers it (or strictly speaking, rediscovers it) for himself, even when not taught it directly by someone else in this lifetime. Furthermore, he also *teaches it to others*. In order to rediscover and to teach the method of ending suffering, it is necessary to stay in the world a bit longer, learn a few more things and gain a few more skills. What must one learn, beyond the supreme thing: how to end one's own suffering? One must learn how to explain it to other people! That means one must learn how other people think, how to communicate with them! This is something śrāvakas or arhats don't have to bother with; only a Buddha does. After making this vow, while working on interacting with beings, attaining skills and wisdom, helping other beings along the way, though still not an arhat, the Buddha-to-be is called a bodhisattva. Why does he make this vow? Why does he go to this trouble? It is out of compassion for living beings, knowing that the teaching of the current Buddha will eventually fade away, that the world of the distant future will be in need of another Buddha. But why does he care, since he presumably has it in his power to end his own suffering, become an arhat, whenever he wants? When he is an arhat, presumably, he will not suffer from anything, including from the thought that other living beings are suffering. But before reaching the end of his own suffering, he still suffers from the thought of the suffering of others, from the thought of the suffering of the future. It is at this time that he makes his vow to become a Buddha rather than merely just another suffering-free arhat.

In the Mahāyāna the role and value of the bodhisattvas is greatly expanded. There are quite a few of them, they are very powerful, and they are greater, more to be admired, than the śrāvakas and arhats. Like the original bodhisattva, they make a vow. They stay in the world, in life after life of suffering, voluntarily. They are like gods, and from the point of view of the history of religions, we can view them as substitutes for the gods of other religions. They are full of compassion for living beings and, unlike the Buddhas and the great arhats of the traditions, they are still around; through their great vows, their great practices for many eons, their great wisdom, they have supernormal and miraculous powers, like gods. Though we can't see them, they are present and hear

our prayers to them. They respond to devotional activities, protect and defend Buddhist practitioners, relieve them of their suffering, and help them progress in their practice. Compared to the ordinary human being, or the usual human practitioners of Buddhism, they really are like gods. They are just one or two steps short of Buddhahood, but they choose to remain there out of their compassion for living beings. Nonetheless, they are still in this for the same reason: to end suffering, to get out of the world, and to get everyone else out of the world.

The other thing to keep in mind, if we are to appreciate what is so important about the *Lotus Sūtra*, is that elsewhere in the Mahāyāna the bodhisattvas are considered very much the exception rather than the rule: they are, as Jan Nattier put it, "a few good men,"[3] special forces, a tiny minority among the total number of Buddhist believers and practitioners. Although there are now more than one of them existing in the vast expanses of the universe at a given time, the vast majority of Buddhists are assumed to be non-bodhisattvas: śrāvakas working toward Nirvana, or arhats who have already achieved it.

THE DOLPHIN SCHOOL

To get a sense of why the *Lotus Sūtra* is supposed to be a shocking and transformative teaching, let's try a little imaginative storytelling—this is, after all, what the *Lotus* itself often does, and then it goes on to identify this very activity (making up stories to try to illustrate a point in various ways) as what makes a Buddha a Buddha: trying to look at things from different angles, from the viewpoint of one's dialogue partners, and then finding a way to communicate. Let's see what we can do.

Imagine a guy—let's call him Bill Gotama—who comes to be very distressed by what he sees going on around him in the world. Life on earth seems beset by unavoidable problems. There's a kind of heaviness he notices in all of his experiences, no matter who he's with or where he is. He tries going to lots of different places around the world to see if things are any better: among villagers in the countryside, among hipsters in the big cities, alone on mountaintops, trekking with outdoorsmen through the wilderness, riding in caravans through the deserts, living in trees with monkeys in the jungle. But wherever he goes, he finds

that whatever creatures he is with fail to get along, and all of them are struggling both with each other and with their environments.

After a long while of this, he vanishes for a few years; no one knows what has become of him. One day he reappears and announces that he has finally discovered the answer: for the past many years he has been living under the sea, where he discovered a totally harmonious and blissful society: the dolphins. It turns out, he says, that living on the surface of the earth was the problem; the heaviness that everyone was experiencing, which made everyone irritable and exhausted, was due to having to walk around on the land and the harsh conditions of scarcity it creates. It takes such a lot of effort to go get what you need and get on the same page as anyone else, because we're all in an unnatural environment. The dolphins, on the contrary, flit about smoothly and nearly weightlessly, in grace and ease and plenty. As a result, it seems, they spontaneously love and understand each other. The good news, Bill Gotama now says, is that he's developed a technique by which all of us land creatures can learn to live underwater, to communicate with the dolphins, and join in their blissful life. They welcome us, and there is more than enough space for all of us there.

Some small number of people take what he says to heart. Yes, they think, this life on land is hopeless. His description of that pervasive heaviness—we see exactly what he means. And since he has been such a reliable witness, because he seems to have such good judgment about this, we are inclined to believe him and we try to learn his technique. Bill says, after all, that we can all go ahead and learn this technique and go live underwater ourselves to see for ourselves; he's not asking us for any kind of blind faith, just to learn a technique, which he's being kind enough to teach us.

Bill Gotama sets up some seminars in hotel ballrooms. At first only these few adventurous and already quite disenchanted souls turn up, but eventually the movement grows. Bill teaches everyone how to hold their breath for longer than usual. He instructs them in the use of scuba gear and how to gradually do without it. He introduces ways to begin transforming lungs into gills. He gives swimming lessons and begins to explain some basic phrases in the dolphin language: "how do you do," "thank you," "what's your name," and so on.

As the movement grows, Bill Gotama can no longer do all the instruction himself. He gets some helpers from among his more advanced students; these are guys who have mastered the underwater breathing and swimming techniques, are masters of dolphin language already—in fact they are now ready to go live in the dolphin world. But out of the kindness of their hearts, they've agreed to stay here on the land and help Bill with the increasingly demanding teaching duties. For now there are thousands and thousands of people, in all the countries around the globe, who want to learn the dolphin technique. Bill's advanced helpers know all there is to know about the technique already, but he sometimes has to have special sessions with them to help them with their pedagogy. After all the teaching of the technique he's done personally, he's picked up a few pointers, common problems in the classroom, and troubleshooting methods, which he can share with them.

Sometimes, at a big lecture to thousands of beginners, Bill will take a few minutes to praise and thank his advanced helpers: "See these five guys here in the front row? These are my advanced helpers. Boy, have they been doing a great job! Let me tell you some of what they're able to do!" And he goes on to list some of their many amazing skills and heroic deeds: this one, after long and arduous study and practice, has become great at upside-down underwater swimming, that's his specialty; that one is a master of gathering up the tastiest underwater plants, he can show you how to do that; and this one has made himself fluent in French, has taken it upon himself to live in France for twenty years in order to understand French culture and language and better teach the many French beginners who want to learn this technique. That one went off and got a degree in advanced engineering so that he could speak to engineers in a way they can understand. That one became a master of chess so that he could better express himself in terms of chess metaphors for some beginners who were having a hard time getting a hang of the technique, but were very good at chess. All of these advanced helpers had learned languages, skills, cultures, methods, lores of various places, all to better communicate the technique for learning to leave life on dry land forever and go join the dolphins at the bottom of the sea.

And this goes on for many years. Then one day Bill Gotama says he has done all he can do; he's finally going to go ahead and move on to

his long-anticipated life down there underwater with the dolphins. Fortunately the advanced helpers will still be around to keep teaching the dolphin technique to others in all of these various ways and languages, in whatever way is necessary, until everyone can make the big move to the underwater world. How lucky we are to have the advanced helpers! How extraordinary they are! How skillful, how compassionate! What would we do without them?

Just before he's getting ready to move underwater, Bill holds another meeting. It is the *Lotus Sūtra*. Here's what he says: "All of my students are advanced helpers."

This is big and astonishing news. Here in this hall we have thousands and thousands of beginners. Some are perhaps only curious, checking this out for the first time; some have been trying and failing to learn to hold their breath for more than thirty seconds: the very first, most basic step in the whole technique. And now Bill is saying, in effect, "Actually, each and every one of you who is hearing my voice right now is an advanced helper: one of these genius heroes who is at once so great at the technique, in the dolphin language, at communicating the technique in all known human languages, and finding a way to reach all people who want to get off the land and into the sea, and who, in addition, are so compassionate and committed and selfless that they are willing to postpone their own move to that blissful state just to teach the technique to get there, over and over and in unimaginably various different ways."

We are also advanced helpers? How can this be?

Bill Gotama has another, even more shocking secret up his sleeve, which he now reveals. It is this: "THERE IS NO DOLPHIN WORLD."

Or, to put in another way, he says: "THIS, and this alone, is the real dolphin world." He is gesturing as he says this to the hall full of his beginner students. He is pointing to his students.

This world, the world of human beings, the world experienced by deluded, suffering novices: that is Nirvana, the only Nirvana, the end of suffering.

Well, as you can imagine, all hell breaks loose. This doesn't make sense! Nothing makes sense anymore if there's no dolphin world! This whole thing has suddenly become ridiculous! The whole point of all these seminars, of this whole worldwide organization, even of the advanced

helpers learning all of these languages and methods, was to teach the technique to get to the dolphin world! If there's no dolphin world, what's the point of being an advanced helper? What's the point of learning the technique?

Someone asks Bill Gotama these questions. He says, "The only dolphin world, the world of grace and ease, where the seemingly inescapable heaviness of life on dry land and friction with one's fellow beings is finally cured, is this very activity of the advanced helpers in teaching you this meaningless technique. I made up the whole thing—all those stories about the dolphin world. Then I had to make up a technique—anything, a random set of procedures—to be the subject matter that you'd be motivated to want to learn, and it would require lots of skills, lots of languages, lots of empathy to be able to teach. But it is this very process of teaching, of learning, of communicating in the empathetic way that is the real cure to the heaviness of life on dry land. This is the real 'water'! These are the real 'dolphins'! And you, all of you, in just being here learning this, what you were really learning was not the technique itself. You were learning *how to teach the technique*. You were witnessing the virtuosity of the advanced helpers. What we have all been teaching is not any particular content, but just how to teach, how to communicate, how to get along with each other. We were here as models that you were, all unawares, absorbing and being transformed by, so that you yourselves, in being communicated with, were learning how to communicate with others. Just being here doing this, we have been, unbeknownst to you, serving as a model that you were absorbing, emulating, coming to internalize."

In the *Lotus Sūtra* the Buddha says: "I come into world only for one reason: to reveal the experience of what it's like to be a Buddha to all living beings. The contents of my teachings were all fictions and beside the point. It was really only to reveal *how to do it* that I did it. You are all bodhisattvas, and this is the only Nirvana." Bill Gotama has never been to the dolphin world either; he made the whole thing up. Nor is he going there now as he bids his adieu. On the contrary, his going away to the dolphin world means he is staying here in this world, the only real dolphin world, and continuing to teach about the dolphin world forever.

The dolphin world in our tale stands for Nirvana. Bill Gotama is the Buddha, the dolphin technique is the Four Noble Truths and the

Eightfold Noble Path, the people learning the technique are the śrāvakas and arhats, the advanced helpers are the bodhisattvas. This is the situation in the *Lotus Sūtra*: We think we are striving to learn a technique to eliminate suffering. But in so doing, we are actually, unbeknownst to ourselves, learning something far more exalted: we are learning to become bodhisattvas. In fact, we are all bodhisattvas without realizing it, and our practice of the bodhisattva path is going on right now, not *in spite of* not realizing it, but *because* we don't realize it. We have never known what we are doing, and it is only in this way that we have thus far been able to actually do it. The *Lotus Sūtra* itself is the news that allows us to know that we have not known in the past, to recognize our own bodhisattvahood in our own past lives of not knowing we were bodhisattvas, allowing us to take up this practice knowingly in the future.

This seeing ourselves as always having been an unwitting bodhisattva is what the *Lotus Sūtra* allows us to do. A bodhisattva, of course, is someone who transforms into all manner of different forms for the sake of instructing and transforming other beings. We are to see our present life as one of these forms that we have taken on as a consequence of our own forgotten bodhisattva vow, which we are now asked to reclaim. Regarding oneself as a bodhisattva is to regard all forms of being as forms in which one can and does take shape, out of our compassion for the world. And it is this recognizing of ourselves in other lives that is the true meaning of the idea of rebirth and of its constant invocation throughout the *Lotus Sūtra*; it means to see all the past, present, and future existences of all beings as varying bodhisattva transformations of ourselves, and to see it this way *right now*.

SIX

THE NEW MIDDLE WAY

Highlights of the *Lotus Sūtra* in Tiantai Context

THE NEW MIDDLE WAY BETWEEN BODHISATTVAS AND NON-BODHISATTVAS

The *Lotus Sūtra* is a complex and controversial text, and it can be approached and understood in a lot of different ways. Our purpose here is not to try to find out what it "really" means, or what its authors meant; rather, our goal is to try to get a grasp on how it might have been read by Tiantai Buddhist thinkers and how it helped inspire the unique forms of Buddhist thought and practice derived from that school. The previous chapter included a story to help illustrate the importance the *Lotus Sūtra* has in the context of Tiantai Buddhism and thereafter in all East Asian Buddhism to a greater or lesser extent. That story was created keeping in mind the situation of a modern reader who is not necessarily immersed in Buddhism sectarian polemics and terminologies. But the *Lotus Sūtra* itself offers many stories, fantastical special effects, wild mythological scenes, and a variety of exhortatory hints to suggest its main ideas and how best to approach them, through which we can now take a little tour, noting the significance they come to have when viewed through the lens of the concerns that will shape Tiantai Buddhism in China (and Tendai in Japan). The reader may find it useful to have a translation of the *Lotus* on hand and read the texts for which the summaries are offered here. The translations of Gene Reeves or Burton Watson would serve admirably for this purpose.

What actually happens in the *Lotus Sūtra* is this: In chapter 1 the Buddha enters a meditative state called "the state of the infinite mean-

ings." Then he shines a light from his forehead that reveals the activities of all sorts of Buddhists practicing Buddhism in various ways, allowing all in the congregation to see what he sees.[1] This is the first hint: he's revealing to them what it's like to be a Buddha, what a Buddha sees and experiences. What does he experience? Living beings striving to be free of suffering in various ways—all of which, we learn in the next chapter, are actually covert ways of working toward being a Buddha. We see what is seen by the Buddha—namely, us in the process of becoming Buddhas, which means becoming ones who see ourselves, and all other beings, in precisely this way.

Then the text does a bit of odd redoubling in a temporal dimension. Read this weird text, the introductory chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and think about how a Buddha sees a Buddha of the past or future seeing a Buddha of the past or future. And note the double identity of Maitreya, who is traditionally, in pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism, the next Buddha, *the* Buddha of the future. He is, we are suddenly told, a lazy and insincere seeker of fame and renown, But, we are told in almost the same breath, he is also the Buddha of the future.[2] We find Manjusri, representative of wisdom, informing Maitreya of both of these facts about himself in quick succession. How can one man be both of these opposite things; how can he have these two opposed identities? One is his past; one is his future. Maitreya himself, trapped in the present, seeing himself only in his present form, sees neither; Manjusri, wisdom, sees past and future at once, together with the present. To see all time is to see him as he was in the past, as he is in the present, and as he will be in the future, all at once, all as part of a single multifaceted trans-temporal identity. That identity includes both his delusion and his Buddhahood as well as the connections between them.

Chapter 2 of the *Lotus Sūtra* is the biggie. We start with the Buddha, uninvited, making a huge megalomaniacal boast: he announces, apropos of nothing, that no one but a Buddha knows what anyone is really doing. The wisdom of the Buddha, he says, is beyond what any ordinary being, and even any śrāvaka or bodhisattva, can know.[3] His powers, notably his power of skillful means, are inconceivable to all other beings. His past and his relationships in the past are the reason: he has closely associated with, seen and been seen by, numberless Buddhas in the past.

Because of this, only a Buddha knows what's really going on—not only with things but also with us sentient beings, with our activities, our practice, our wisdom, our course, our past, our future, our causal matrix. The Buddha says:

> Only a Buddha together with a Buddha knows the ultimate reality of all things: how they appear, what their natures are, what they're made of, what they are capable of, what they are doing, what their causes are, what their conditions are, what their effects are, what their consequences are, and the way in which all these factors from beginning to end are equally ultimate and are ultimately one and the same.[4]

This passage is immensely important in East Asian Buddhism, in the interpretation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and especially in Tiantai thought. The term "the ultimate reality of all things" has a double meaning in English, which is intended to cover some of the ambiguity of the phrase (as used in Kumārajīva's Chinese translation from the Sanskrit[5]). The ultimate reality "of" all things could mean (1) the ultimate reality that belongs to, stands behind or under, all things—the substratum or source or final truth about all things. But it could also mean (2) the ultimate realness of each and every particular thing, that each particular aspect of the world as we see it and feel it is ultimately real, that each one is in fact the Absolute itself, the Buddha-nature, the final fact about the universe. Since the phrase is then explained with a list of phenomenal reality—appearances, activities, causes, effects—rather than with an indication of something above or beyond these facts of this-worldly reality, it is justifiably taken in the second sense, although building on the first sense. In much of Mahāyāna Buddhism, perhaps "Emptiness" might be looked to as the ultimate reality "of" all things in the first sense: contrary to the appearance of this table as a table, it is not really a table; the real truth about it is that it's empty, a not-table. But in the second sense defined above, "tableness" itself is what is declared to be the ultimate reality, the final truth not only about this apparent table but about all other things as well. Each thing, each appearance, each action would have to be the ultimate reality "of" all other things. Tiantai thought can be viewed as a working through of the implications of this.

Take another look at the passage quoted above. You'll notice that the Buddha doesn't just say that "only a Buddha" knows the ultimate reality

of all things; instead he uses a strange phrase for where to find the knowledge of the ultimate reality, sometimes translated as "among buddhas" or "between Buddhas," but more literally translated as "only a Buddha together with a Buddha."[6] This has an enormous hidden significance, because it hints at one of the main themes of the *Lotus Sūtra*: that real wisdom is no one's possession; that no single viewpoint—not even that of *a* Buddha, a single Buddha—can ever encompass the ultimate reality of all things; that there is always "more to know" than any one perspective of knowing, however vast and exalted, can encompass. This is not a limitation of the knower, but a built-in character of any experience, of any knowable thing. We have seen some of the reasons for this in the discussion of Emptiness in previous chapters. Here the Buddha is addressing sentient beings, informing them that he sees that they too will be Buddhas and, in an important sense, already are Buddhas. That means that the statement is made from one Buddha to another Buddha. It is the discussion itself, then, that takes place between "one Buddha together with another Buddha"—the interaction of the Buddha and ourselves is the real Buddha.

A fancy word for this kind of thing is "intersubjectivity," but it really just means that the real nature of things is always an overflowing, always a give-and-take, always an interchange between perspectives on that thing, and can never be closed off or totalized within any one perspective. There is more to know about a coffee cup than any one perspective, even the enlightened perspective, can ever know. But this perspective can know that there are other perspectives on this thing to be had. This Buddha can know that there are other Buddhas, that all beings are Buddhas, that the Buddha-wisdom is a constant and unending dialogue between all manners of different Buddhas. For each sentient being is its own type of Buddha, each with its own perspective. When I am told by the Buddha that I will be a Buddha, I can project the Buddha I will someday become looking back at me as the pre-life of his Buddhahood, as myself a form in which his Buddhahood appeared. When I think of that Buddha, I and the Buddha who is me in the future—who sees me also as a Buddha—are two Buddhas. It is this wisdom that is the knowledge existing only for "a Buddha together with another Buddha."

The great dramatic surprise of this chapter, and of the whole *Lotus Sūtra*, depends on this uncalled-for inflation of the Buddha's status. For it is the setup for the big punch line: *each living being is equal to a Buddha*. The inequality is first stressed, the loftiness and breadth of the Buddha's achievement, how much above the rest of us he is—and then we are told that, by the way, we are all just like that. To say "You are all Buddhas" would be meaningless, after all, if the meaning of "Buddha" were not first established by contrast to the ordinary state of human existence. The value is first established by means of a contrast, and then it is collapsed, not by leveling the Buddha down to us, but by bringing us up to his exalted level. He first makes a sharp and enormous distinction between the experience, knowledge, and perception of a Buddha and anyone else. The Buddha has great skillful means, which none of the śrāvakas or even the advanced bodhisattvas can possibly fathom. The main thing he knows about that others have no inkling of, however, is not simply "the way things are," but, much more centrally, "the way living beings are, what living beings are really *doing*." What are they doing, unbeknownst to themselves? They are becoming Buddhas. They are practicing the bodhisattva way. So another strange loop appears here: the Buddha alone knows that we are all Buddhas in training. The Buddha is completely unlike us: he knows; we don't. But what he knows is this: that we are not as unlike one another as we think. So later in the same chapter he announces, "Long ago I made a vow to make all living beings equal to myself. And as of now that vow has already been fulfilled."[7]

This chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* also announces that there is no Nirvana in the sense previously conceived. Rather, "all phenomena have always been attributes of Nirvana."[8] That is, the world as we see it, as part of our experience as (deluded) living beings, consists entirely of the attributes of Nirvana. The "true" Nirvana is not the leaving of samsara, but samsara itself. That is, not only is there no separation or mutual exclusivity between the two, as perhaps can be deduced from the general Mahāyāna philosophy of Emptiness discussed above, nor is it merely that samsara and Nirvana are just the deluded and enlightened view, respectively, of a reality that itself can be viewed either way; rather, even the delusory perceptions and conceptions that make

up our experience of samsara are themselves all attributes of Nirvana itself.

And it is in this chapter that the Buddha announces that he came into the world solely to accomplish one thing: to reveal to living beings the experience of being a Buddha and allow them too to enter it.[9] Not to teach the technique, but to show them what it's like to be a teacher of the technique, who has mastered the technique, who has arrived at what the technique allows one to reach—which is the total vision of all beings, all the various states of mind of all beings, all the delusions of all beings, and all the ways to communicate with all of these beings on the basis of those delusions.

Further, he makes it known that each of them, anyone who is hearing his instruction, is in fact a bodhisattva—a Buddha in training.[10] This includes, emphatically and centrally, the śrāvakas and arhats. They denied they were bodhisattvas; they believed they were working toward Nirvana as the state of extinguishing all passions and leaving samsara forever—becoming merely an arhat, not a bodhisattva or a Buddha. Now the message of the Buddha for them was, in effect: Your work toward Nirvana, your very denial of interest in the goal of Buddhahood, your sense of your own activity as a śrāvaka rather than a Buddha—all of these are themselves parts of your bodhisattva training. Coming to the seminar to learn the technique, trying to master it, breathing underwater—although there is no underwater world—these were all indirect ways of teaching you how to be an advanced helper: how to communicate empathetically with others, as I or the helpers have been doing to you. This is the meaning of "skillful means." You are doing much more than you realized, *and you need not change your ways.*

Whatever you are doing now, any form of interaction with Buddha you see or conceive, even just distractedly or jokingly scratching a Buddha-image in the sand, is the small sprout of Buddhahood. If you keep doing it for countless ages, in lifetime after lifetime, it will lead you to full Buddhahood. Note that this is where the literal belief in multiple lifetimes seems crucial: you need lots of time for these small causes to bear fruit. Note also that at this stage in the sūtra, this is said explicitly only of positive involvements with Buddhism in some form, however trivial: ignoring or slandering the Buddha altogether is not yet described

as a cause of future Buddhahood. Both of these ideas will be radically undermined as the sūtra continues.

Chapter 3 of the *Lotus Sūtra* tells a story to illustrate this point. A house is burning. Small children within it are preoccupied with their play and do not notice the flames. Indeed, they don't even understand what fire is, nor do they understand their father's desperate attempts to alert them to it. He considers several ways to save them—perhaps by forcibly carrying them out. But instead he devises an "upāya," a skillful means, to rescue them. He follows their own likings, their own desires. They want to play; we may presume, although it is not explicitly stated, that like many little boys the world over the play that is absorbing them involves toy vehicles of some kind. Here is one, perhaps, who is obsessed by his toy goat–pulled cart. Here is another obsessed by his toy deer cart. Here is another obsessed by his toy ox cart. The children are endangered by their desires, their pleasures in these things, which blind them to the danger threatening to consume them. Dad announces that there is a great big *real* goat cart waiting outside the house. The goat-obsessed child, moved by his own greed, runs out of the house. There's also a great big real deer cart out there and an ox cart too, he says. The lust for more play, each in his individual and idiosyncratic way, makes the children run outside, greedy for more. Precisely what had endangered them, their obsessions and pleasures, are what now save them once the extra promise of bigger and better versions of their desires is made by the father. Once they get outside, though, they find that it was all a lie. There are no deer carts or goat carts, and even the ox cart is not quite as promised; actually, it is much grander and still more exciting than had been advertised. The father gives a magnificent ox cart, encompassing all the virtues of the other promised but nonexistent carts, to each of his children.

Then a big question comes up: is the father a liar? The same question could be asked of our dolphin technique instructor, Bill Gotama. Was he lying when he said there was a dolphin world that he was teaching people to reach? Yes and no. Indeed, in one of the wittiest lines of the sūtra, the Buddha remarks, "In fact the father did deliver on his promise: for in saving their lives, in bestowing on them the intactness of their continuing survival, he was providing them with a plaything of sorts!"[11] That is,

the *meaning* of "plaything" has changed. It is equivocal. It is, if you like, a kind of pun. We must recall here the discussion of Emptiness from the previous chapter. Nothing has a fixed identity. Every attributed identity is a provisional one. What makes a designation good or true is that it serves to deliver one from suffering, which also means to get one to pass beyond the designation: the designation must be self-canceling in order to be true. What they wanted was a specific plaything, conceiving "plaything" as a fixed entity with its own unambiguous identity. What they got was something that "in a way" allowed them to play all the more: their own lives. Their desire alone was endangering them. Their desire alone was what liberated them. But the meaning of that desired object changed in the process: by desiring X, they were enabled to attain Y, which, it turns out, is also a kind of X, in a manner of speaking. Perhaps you desire sexual pleasure. The Buddha tells you that practicing meditation will produce the most intense possible sexual pleasure. When you do the practice, you do (according to Buddhist sources) indeed experience intense pleasure of a sort. But this is no longer what you had meant when you *originally* sought and conceived of sexual pleasure. Instead, it has revealed to you the deeper and more expansive meaning of "sexual pleasure," even though it appears to be something quite different, or even exactly the opposite of what you originally thought you meant.[12]

The burning house in the story represents the world. We are attached to it by our idiosyncratic desires, which blind us to its dangers. The Buddha preaches about something to appeal specifically to our desires: Nirvana. Nirvana is the end of suffering. Our sensual desires too were desires to relieve our suffering, to attain joy. So Nirvana, which appears to be a denial of all desires, is just a grander example of a desire, the essence of all desires. What all desires want is Nirvana, the freedom from coercion, dependence, limitation, conditionality, suffering, impermanence. It is just like the desire for sex, fame, power, but more so. Lured by this promise of the end of suffering, we pursue the śrāvaka path. When we get out of the house, however, we find that Nirvana is nothing like we expected: the end of suffering is not the end of suffering as we imagined it. But it is a kind of end of suffering, just as the saved lives are "a kind of plaything." It's just that the real end of suffering does not mean that suffering is eliminated, but rather that it's no longer an obstacle to the

greatest joy, the true freedom that is not obstructed even by involvement in the world of suffering and all of its delusions.

The deer cart is the *śrāvaka* vehicle; the goat cart is the *pratyekabuddha* vehicle; the ox cart is the *bodhisattva* vehicle. The ox cart is what all of them get: all of them are really bodhisattvas. But note that the ox cart that is received is not exactly the same as the ox cart promised, desired, imagined while the children were still inside the house; rather, it is a much grander ox cart. It is, in fact, the ox cart that satisfies all three of these divergent types of desire at once. The difference between the ox cart promised and the ox cart attained is that the latter includes the other two carts. The difference between the bodhisattva vehicle as conceived before the *Lotus Sūtra* and the revelation of the *Lotus Sūtra* is that now bodhisattvahood includes also śrāvakahood and pratyekabuddhahood: it also includes the paths that denied or ignored the whole idea of bodhisattvahood; those deniers too are bodhisattvas. The difference between the advanced helpers before and after the big announcement by Bill Gotama is that the real form of advanced helper status is the one that includes beginners and learners as well as the obvious teachers and helpers: all of them are actually advanced helpers.

THE NEW MIDDLE WAY BETWEEN DESIRE AND DESIRELESSNESS

In chapter 4 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Sariputra, a representative of the śrāvakas, tells his own parable about what all of this means to him. "Over the years," he says, "we śrāvakas have often heard the Buddha talking about how great the bodhisattvas were—in fact, we've sometimes had to relate the greatness of the bodhisattva path to new students, acting as a spokesman for the Buddha. But we always thought we were talking about something that had nothing to do with ourselves, with our own path, our own destiny. We thought this was all about others, and deep down, although we were supposed to be entirely free of desire like good arhats, we wondered why we had been left out of all this glory: all the powers of the bodhisattvas, their knowledge of the minds and desires of all sentient beings, their zillions of lifetimes and transformations into all sorts of different beings, their great compassion, their infinitely varied forms

of wisdom. We knew only about the Four Noble Truths, the analysis of our suffering and ending of our own suffering, and that, we thought, was the end of our story; we would never be reborn to any other destiny. Now the Buddha tells us that we ourselves are actually bodhisattvas, that we too will live out this vast bodhisattva life, that we too inherit the fullness of the Buddha's own wisdom, that we will be Buddhas!" The Buddha sums up the situation in a phrase that is the heart of the whole *Lotus Sūtra*, and the key to all of Tiantai thought: "Without seeking it, we nonetheless effortlessly attained it."[13] That is, we never set out to become a Buddha, we had no intention to do so, we made no effort directed toward that goal; in fact we explicitly rejected that ambition, content to end our suffering and with it our existence. Now we learn that by so doing, unbeknownst to ourselves we were actually practicing the bodhisattva way and that we will in fact become Buddhas!

Sariputra illustrates the situation by comparing himself, and the other śrāvakas, to a son who, while still a youth, had been separated from his father, went off on his own, and became lost. The father searches all over for him but finally gives up in despair; he can find him nowhere. Instead he settles in a certain town and becomes very rich. Meanwhile the son has to fend for himself and lives hand to mouth in extreme poverty, taking whatever odd jobs come his way. In his wanderings, quite by chance, he eventually comes to the gate of his father's opulent mansion. He is greatly intimidated by the splendor of this palatial estate, seeing nothing there that seems remotely relatable to his own condition. This is someone as different from himself as imaginable, someone with whom he has nothing at all in common. Indeed, he fears this must be a king of some sort, a person of great authority and might who will force him into military service or compulsory labor if he doesn't flee as quickly as possible. The father, instantly recognizing this broken, impoverished man at the gate as his own long-lost son, is overjoyed. He sends his servants to apprehend him, but the son is terrified and falls into a faint. Realizing that his son has forgotten his own identity and is in no condition to take in the news, the father devises a skillful means: the son is allowed to return to the poor part of town, and two ragged-looking messengers are sent pretending to be looking randomly for cheap day laborers paid at the minimum wage. This the son can accept; it accords with his own

concept of himself and his worth. He takes the job and works shoveling out manure for twenty years!

The father, of course, represents the Buddha. The son represents Sariputra and the other śrāvakas. Although the text is a little vague on this point, it makes sense to assume that the father was not yet rich at the time of the estrangement: the Buddha and all sentient beings began together as sentient beings, bound by kinship, in the same state of samsara. During their separation, the father becomes rich, meaning the Buddha becomes enlightened. But his bond with all beings from before that time, as one deluded suffering being among them, remains. Shoveling the manure is a metaphor for the practice of the śrāvaka path: cleaning out delusion, just trying to get pure for one's own benefit, with no greater purpose or positive goal beyond that—a rather shocking critique of earlier Buddhism!

Sometimes the father himself dresses in ragged clothes, impersonating a foreman, and goads the son to work hard or compliments his diligence. Sometime later the father tells the son that because he's been such a good laborer, he's being promoted to a house servant, no longer having to labor in the muck.

The irony here, of course, is that the real reason the son gets promoted has nothing to do with the quality of his work. He was a blood son from the beginning; he is only gradually coming to a state where his own sense of himself can accept his own patrimony, which actually was his own possession, his own birthright, from the beginning. Similarly, the śrāvakas think that their progress on the path is due to their good work, that they have attained something new, that their state of relative peace and small enlightenment is achieved by their practices. Actually, it is a meager first taste of what was always already theirs, which they are only gradually getting mentally prepared to accept as their own.

Then the son receives another promotion: he is made accountant and treasurer of the estate. His job will be to oversee all the business transactions, to know exactly what the father owns, to keep track of all his expenditures and income. This is a metaphor for the śrāvakas' knowledge of the bodhisattva way, the glory of the Buddhas, and even their retelling of it to others: they were "counting someone else's treasure," could enumerate all of these qualities, but thought that it all pertained

to another, not realizing they were enumerating things about themselves, about their own possessions, their own destiny.

The father tells his trusty accountant that he is "like a son" to him, just as the Buddha metaphorically describes his students as his children. But then, on his deathbed, the father calls a meeting of all sorts of kings and dignitaries and officially announces the truth: "This man is my own blood son and always has been. All that I have I leave to him: all of these treasures he's been counting, thinking they belonged to another, actually belong to him! And always have!"

Two important points must be noted about this story. First, note that the status of the skillful means is configured here very differently than it is in the Two Truths schema of Emptiness theory. The resources of the estate—the servants, the buildings, the treasury—are what the father uses as a skillful means to draw his son to the final recognition of his own status, to his final enlightenment. But these resources are not abandoned when the son finally does come into his inheritance. On the contrary, these *are* the inheritance! This means that what one is enlightened to when one is enlightened is not the dropping away of all skillful means, the letting go of the raft, the transcendence of all determinate phenomenal concepts, ideas, practices, forms. Rather, these things are the very content of enlightenment, but seen from a very different perspective. Enlightenment is not the renunciation of skillful means. Enlightenment is the *mastery* of all skillful means.

Second, note how this story illustrates the key idea of the *Lotus Sūtra*: "Without seeking it, we nonetheless effortlessly attained it." The son did not seek to inherit the estate. He made no effort toward that end at all. He had no desire for it. But that does not mean he made no effort *at all*. Quite the contrary; he was working diligently the whole time. It wasn't that he had no desire *at all*, just no desire for the goal he eventually attained. In fact, he needed his desire to get there—his desire for *something else*. He needed to want to make his meager minimum wage and not get fired. In fact, he was completely devoted to pursuing his own desire, which was the sole means to get beyond that desire, to get something he had never dreamed of. There is a fundamental misrecognition and misdirection involved in the means/ends process here, in the structure of desire, just as we saw in the story of the burning house. And this is

the great contribution of the *Lotus Sūtra* to the central problem of Buddhism: the Middle Way between desire and no-desire that is the distinctive initial breakthrough of Buddhism. We are not to discard our desires. On the other hand, we are not to take our desires seriously, as if they could actually be fulfilled. No, desire whatever you desire and pursue it wholeheartedly. But know also, once you've heard the *Lotus Sūtra*, that what you will end up attaining through this pursuit will definitely *not*—or at least will not *only* be, or not *ultimately* be—whatever it is you think you're going to attain, what you want to attain, what is motivating you to work so hard at attaining it. The fulfillment of the desire will not bring the expected satisfaction. It will turn out to be a stepping-stone to attaining something completely unexpected, something you presently cannot even dream of right now, which actually subsumes and nullifies in the process the thing you thought you were striving for. So go ahead and desire, strive with all your might to attain your desires, and at the same time know that your desires are futile, are deceptions, are systematic misdirections. This is neither desirelessness nor desire: the new Middle Way.

Another story, in chapter 7 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, illustrates this same point perhaps even more simply.[14] Some mountain climbers are on an expedition to find a treasure. They grow tired and want to turn back. Their leader thinks this would be a terrible shame and devises a skillful means to get them to keep going. Using his (convenient!) magical powers, he conjures up a mirage of a beautiful city just ahead, full of luxury resorts and all manner of entertainments and recreations to refresh and relax them. "Just keep going a little while longer," he tells them, "and we can take a break at that resort, indulging all our desires, resting up." Since it is close by, just up ahead, they persist and enter the illusory city, indulge their desires, and have a wonderful time. But then they want to stay there and forget all about the treasure. The leader then makes the city vanish and tells them that it was all just a skillful means, a mirage. This announcement is like the moment of the preaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* itself. "Now that you are rested," he says, "you can continue onward to the real treasure." The illusory city represents, again, the śrāvaka Nirvana. It is not real. It is just a false carrot dangled in front of them to keep them going. But note that when they were progressing toward the illusory city,

they were *also* progressing toward the treasure that lay beyond it. Each step they took was efficacious in two ways at once: it got them closer to the illusory city, and it got them closer to the treasure. However, they could only progress toward the treasure by *not knowing they were doing so*, by thinking they were heading only toward the nearby pleasure resort. Here again the message is this: Desire that phantom city! Work toward it! It will be a total failure, because that city is only a mirage, but your desire to get there is nonetheless something wholesome and necessary, and that desire for it is the only way to get you *beyond* that city, to get you to the real treasure, which is utterly unlike it. The new Middle Way, again, between desire and desirelessness.

THE NEW MIDDLE WAY BETWEEN ENLIGHTENMENT AND DELUSION: ASSURANCES OF BUDDHAHOOD

As the *Lotus Sūtra* progresses, sprinkled between these parables we find one figure after another being assured of his or her future Buddhahood. These assurances expand as the text continues, including more and more people, each of whom is given a very specific assurance, a specific past and a specific future: you were in the past such and such a person; in the future you will be such and such a Buddha, with such and such a name and such and such characteristics. The Buddha tells each inquiring sentient being about his deep past and deep future, putting his present story into a much larger context of long past and long future. This is an illustration of what the Buddha meant when he said that only a Buddha together with a Buddha knows all the specific facts about the causal career of any individual thing or, more to the point, person. This is what the Buddhas know about "how they appear, what their natures are, what they're made of, what they are capable of, what they are doing, what their causes are, what their conditions are, what their effects are, what their consequences are, and the way in which all these factors from beginning to end are equally ultimate, and are ultimately one and the same." Unbeknownst to themselves, all of these characters have long been working to become Buddhas, all of their specific activities and practices (even, or especially, those that denied any intention to become a Buddha) were resources and causes leading to this goal, and in the future they will be

such and such a Buddha, of such and such an appearance, environment, and group of followers. All of these—the whole career, from delusional deep past to gloriously enlightened deep future, cause and effect—are of one piece; from beginning to end they are equally ultimate and ultimately one and the same.

When we get to chapter 10 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, "Teachers of the Dharma," this expansion of assurances takes a new turn; it now is directed at the reader of the text—at *you*. You, as a reader of the text, are also given the assurance of future Buddhahood. That is, "anyone who hears this *Lotus Sūtra* and experiences even one moment of pleasure in it," will become a Buddha—in fact, the text seems to say in Chinese that they have *already* become a Buddha at this moment.[15] In other words, anyone who understands what it would mean *if it were true* (rather than having to actually accept it as true), who understands the wondrous implications of the idea set forth here, has activated those effects. This is a strange self-verifying structure that is characteristic of the *Lotus Sūtra*. For the *Lotus Sūtra* is a teaching about *recontextualization*; it is a way of showing how the meaning and identity of things (persons, practices) is altered completely when these things are seen in a new, larger context (e.g., when put into a connection with a broader horizon of past and future, or seen in the gaze of the Buddha).

Now, to recontextualize something all you need to do is place something new into juxtaposition with it; this automatically creates a new context. To recontextualize something with the idea of "recontextualization" itself, all you have to do is make clear what recontextualization is. The self-actualizing power of this idea is somewhat akin to the advent of the idea of "humor" in a small child. When a child sees the people around him laughing, he will himself, typically, also start laughing. What he is finding funny is not the content of the joke being enjoyed by the adults, of which he may have no understanding at all, but the very fact that people are finding something funny. The very fact that all of these adults now and then start shaking and barking in this weird way is itself funny. To show someone what it means for something to be funny, all you have to do is laugh—laughter itself is funny! Funniness is funny! In the same way, the *Lotus Sūtra* idea of recontextualization is itself a recontextualization of our experience; it places our own experience into

a new context. So to hear it, to understand what it is saying, to see the way these other figures in the sūtra hear about it and are overjoyed by it, is to be overjoyed by it oneself. To understand how they are liberated by being recontextualized by this teaching is itself to be recontextualized and liberated by this teaching.

We may notice, too, that this situation is analogous to what happened to the lost son: he thought he was counting someone else's treasures, and then he found out that by doing so he was actually coming into possession of his own treasures, that the treasures of the other person were actually his own treasures, which he gained access to simply by becoming aware of them.

We must also note that this assurance of Buddhahood for all readers and hearers of the *Lotus Sūtra* is simply an extension of the primary teaching given in chapter 2: the Buddha teaches only bodhisattvas. Whoever the Buddha teaches is a bodhisattva. If you are reading a Buddhist sūtra, the Buddha is teaching you. Therefore, you are a bodhisattva. Therefore, you will one day be a Buddha. Therefore, your present activity is part of the process of becoming a Buddha.

Chapter 10 drives this point home by saying that all of these people who take even a moment's delight in the sūtra are not only future Buddhas, but they are also *past* bodhisattvas, who have chosen to be born here in the world on the basis of their bodhisattva vow to save all beings. That is, again, they are already bodhisattvas; their past context and future context are both opened up into Buddhahood. This sort of claim is very common in the rest of the *Lotus Sūtra*: if you are doing A right now, you have done XYZ in the past. For example, if you are liking or hearing or teaching this sūtra right now, you have made offerings and been in close contact with billions of Buddhas in the past. These statements can be read in two different ways. The first, more obvious and literal reading is that the present activity is *a sign or result of having done something in the past*, so the fact that you are doing this now shows or reveals what you must have been doing in the past. But the deeper meaning of these statements, locked in by some of the ways such statements are made in the rest of the sūtra, is that the present activity is *what changes the past*, what makes it so that the past of this present is such and such. That is, given the irresolvable ambiguity of all activity rooted in Mahāyāna Emptiness

theory, the present activity recontextualizes the past as much as the deep past recontextualizes the present. The present activity has a retroactive effect on the past.

By delighting in the *Lotus Sūtra* right now, you make it the case that in the past you were a great bodhisattva who made a vow to be born here and now as this particular ordinary person. The past is a function of the present; it is the past of this present, never definitive, always changing. The same goes for the future: by delighting in the *Lotus Sūtra* teaching, the teaching that anything you are doing is bodhisattvahood, you live in a present with a future Buddhahood and a past bodhisattvahood. That is the structure of the present; it is a present with bodhisattvahood behind it and Buddhahood in front of it. More searchingly, we could say that the present has a past and a present *within it*, as parts of its own structure: the pastness of this present is bodhisattvahood; the futureness of this present moment is Buddhahood. This is the reason for the insistent focus on the doctrine of multiple lives and rebirth in this sūtra, the new work to which this old Indic idea is being put. And this teaching, giving a new conception and structure to our understanding of time, is perhaps the most profound dimension of the *Lotus* teaching, which is the basis of much of what is most remarkable in Tiantai thought. It is precisely this question of the structure of time that becomes the focus for the remaining parts of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

THE NEW MIDDLE WAY BETWEEN TIME AND TIMELESSNESS: THE PAST MADE PRESENT

After chapter 10 the *Lotus Sūtra* shifts into a new narrative gear, giving a vivid dramatization of these ideas about time, recontextualization, and Buddhahood. The surreal drama begins with an enormous stupa suddenly emerging out of the earth and rising into the sky, where it hovers above the congregation like some macabre spaceship. A stupa is, in Buddhist tradition, really a tomb or reliquary. It is a shrine in which some fragment (a bone, a tooth, a hair) of a dead Buddha is enshrined, traditionally becoming a site of homage and worship. But in this creepy scene a loud voice emerges from the tomb, saying, in effect, "Well done, Śākyamuni Buddha! You have taught this *Lotus Sūtra* for the sake of all

living beings, and every word is true!" Everyone's astonished. They ask what's going on, and the Buddha tells them that this stupa contains the entire living body (not the partial dead body as in an ordinary stupa) of a Buddha named Many Treasures. The thing is, this Buddha passed into Nirvana—generally understood to mean "died"—billions and billions of years ago. The teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* here and now, however, has seemingly revived him. He has come in accordance with a vow he made when still alive—namely, that whenever this sūtra is taught, he'll show up, no matter how long he's been extinct, and praise and bear witness to it.

The crowd wants to have a look at this long deceased Buddha. Śākyamuni tells them that the way this vow works, he has to gather together in this one place all of his "partial embodiments," all of his transformation bodies, all the various forms in which he himself is presently appearing throughout the universe; then the stupa will open and we'll be able to see the Buddha inside. He calls them all together to congregate beneath the stupa—billions and billions of seemingly "other" Buddhas, other bodhisattvas, other beings, who are, evidently, really alternate forms of Śākyamuni himself, alternate identities, transformations through which he does his work of liberating beings here in the present. Here again we see the motif of what was initially thought to be "the other" turning out to be "one's own," as in the case of the lost son and the counted treasures of his father. Once all the transformations are in one place, the stupa opens up; Śākyamuni flies up there with everyone to take a look, and then he himself enters the stupa and sits beside the ancient Buddha Many Treasures.[16] The two Buddhas sit side by side in the stupa—a popular motif in East Asian Buddhist art.

What's going on here? It is not hard to see that we have a fanciful narrative version of the ideas just played out in another form in the earlier parts of the sūtra. The reappearance of the long extinct past as part of the present assembly illustrates the retroactive power of the present, the way the *Lotus Sūtra* idea of recontextualization itself recontextualizes and transforms the past. That past, seemingly dead and gone, of no further relevance, now becomes a confirmation and contribution to this present moment of the *Lotus Sūtra* practice. But its full implications remain hidden until all the present forms of one's activity are also seen at a single

glance, as forms of oneself. Just as all other *moments* are seen as internal to this present moment, with its retroactive power of recontextualization, so too do all other *people* reveal themselves to be internal to oneself, to be forms of oneself, part of one's transformations as a bodhisattva, the many forms one is taking to liberate living beings and progress toward Buddhahood. Just as the idea "you are and have always been an inadvertent Bodhisattva" changes the way you see all the past and future that "surround" this present moment, so too does it change the perception of all the things and people in the present, all the other selves that "surround" this experience of being the self that you are. Just as the Buddha of the past is made whole and alive by this recontextualization, so too is the Buddha of the present made whole and alive by it—all other beings are his alternate bodies.

When the two Buddhas sit side by side, then, we have a dramatization of that funny line in chapter 2: "Only a Buddha together with another Buddha realize the ultimate reality of all things." Here they are, a Buddha together with a Buddha. That means the past with the present. The *Lotus Sūtra* says, "You will be a Buddha; you are a future Buddha." That means the you of now relates to the you of the future. The you of the future is a Buddha. A Buddha looks back at his own past and sees the you of right now. He realizes that even then he was a Buddha. The past looking at the future and the future looking at the past—that is "a Buddha together with another Buddha." The *Lotus Sūtra* is a story of *prospective retrospection*, where you gaze upon a Buddha who you will become, which enacts the gaze backward of that Buddha to you, his prior self, as a nascent Buddha. The same relation applies among all beings within the present moment, brought together here as the transformation bodies of Śākyamuni. Whenever two living beings meet, it is "a Buddha together with another Buddha," and only in this relationship is the ultimate reality of all things revealed.

THE NEW MIDDLE WAY BETWEEN PRESENCE AND ABSENCE: THE BUDDHA'S "ETERNAL LIFE"

After this surreal scene, the two Buddhas together, the crowd is all riled up; they want to put the *Lotus Sūtra* into practice here in our world,

and they ask how it's done. The Buddha answers, in chapter 12, saying, "Well, the way one *would* do that, if it had to be done, would be with a fairly standard set of Mahāyāna practices," which he proceeds to relate. But then, surprisingly, we are told that this is not necessary at all, for the *Lotus Sūtra* practice is always already being practiced here in this world: billions of bodhisattvas emerge from under the earth, saying they've always been here practicing the *Lotus Sūtra* (chapter 15). The question is then asked by the astonished onlookers: "Who are all these bodhisattvas? We've never seen them before. Who started them on their bodhisattva practice? Who gave them the initial teaching?" The Buddha says that he himself has done so, that all of these bodhisattvas took their initial bodhisattva vows and began their bodhisattva careers with Śākyamuni Buddha as their teacher. "But," the crowd asks, "how is that possible? We have been with you all this time and we've never seen them before. Besides, they are all advanced bodhisattvas who have been practicing for gazillions of years; but you have only been a Buddha for forty years or so, and according to the standard situation, a bodhisattva can only get his initial teaching from a full Buddha. It's like a strapping young man pointing to a white-haired geezer and saying, 'That's my son.' The linear time sequence of past and future is all confused."

This is the setup for the final big revelation made in the *Lotus Sūtra*, which comes in chapter 16. The Buddha asks us to imagine a huge expanse of space and then a commensurately huge expanse of time, beyond the powers of human imagination to conceive. Then he declares: "For an even longer time I have been constantly here in this world, preaching the Dharma and giving instruction, and also in gazillions of other worlds, guiding and benefiting living beings. During this time I have spoken of Burning Lamp Buddha and others and have also said that I would enter Nirvana, become extinguished. But all this was said merely as a skillful means."[17]

Burning Lamp Buddha is the Buddha who inspired Śākyamuni, in a previous lifetime, to aspire toward Buddhahood, under whom he had taken his bodhisattva vow. Burning Lamp is the Buddha from whom, according to the traditional account, Śākyamuni himself received his initial instruction as a Buddha-to-be, a bodhisattva; under whom he took his bodhisattva vows; from whom he received his own assurance

of Buddhahood. Burning Lamp is Śākyamuni's teacher, the source of his own training. Now he is saying that Burning Lamp was he himself! That he made up the whole story about Burning Lamp! That is, when you achieve Buddhahood, even the prior Buddhas who inspired and instructed you become aspects of your own present Buddhahood. You become the source of your own source. Like the "transformation bodies" of the present and the other Buddhas of the past, all the causes and conditions of one's own past are now recast in the light of this new present, become functions of it, recontextualized and transformed into parts and aspects of this present vision.

The Buddha continues:

> When living beings come before me, I view them with the Buddha-eye, perceiving the condition of their faith and other capacities, and then speak of myself, according to what is necessary for their liberation, as having this or that name, this or that lifespan, and tell them that I will enter the extinction of Nirvana. . . . Everything I've said in all the scriptures is for the sake of liberating living beings. Sometimes I describe my own person, sometimes the person of another; sometimes I manifest as myself, sometimes as another; sometimes I present my own deeds, sometimes those of another. And all of it is true, not false. How so, you ask? The Buddha sees the attributes of the world as they really are: without either birth or death, neither emerging nor retreating, free of both being-in-the-world and extinction-from-the-world, all of it neither real nor illusory, neither thus nor otherwise—not at all how the beings of the world view themselves. The Buddha sees all of this clearly and without error, but in accordance with the various natures, desires, practices, and conceptions of living beings, in order to generate good capacities in them he produces all sorts of narratives, parables, phrases, ways of preaching. I never cease doing these Buddha-deeds even for an instant, and will continue doing so as my lifespan continues onward without measurable end, constantly dwelling here unextinguished.[18]

What does this mean? In Buddhism all beings are born with a past. The Buddha too was born with a past. In early Buddhism the Buddha's past was thought to be many lifetimes of being a bodhisattva. Even as a bodhisattva he had been born with a past. His past, then, prior to being a bodhisattva, was many lives as a deluded and suffering sentient being. In the *Lotus Sūtra* the Buddha reveals that this was not the whole story. He tells us he has been a Buddha already for a long time—an incalculably, immeasurably long time. All of those past lives in which he was appar-

ently a deluded and suffering sentient being, or a bodhisattva working toward Buddhahood, were actually already the lives of the Buddha. That was what life after attaining Buddhahood was like.

What is Buddhahood, though? What did the Buddha discover when he became a Buddha? The story of his enlightenment tells us that on that fateful day he came to see several things: First, the past lives of all living beings, arising and perishing, coming to appear here in one form in accordance with their actions (karma), dwell in that state for a while, suffering and performing further actions in an attempt to relieve that suffering, and then breaking down, dissolving, and arising again in another form somewhere else. This panorama of life appeared to the Buddha's mind. Among those creatures whose beginningless history he intuited was ourselves. We too were alive back then, in another form—perhaps as an ant or a camel, as a king or a god. The Buddha saw the trajectory of our very long history as he sat under the bodhi tree. He remarked: "What is more—the waters of all the oceans in the world or the tears you have cried in your incalculably many lifetimes, dying and having those you love die on you, losing what you love and forced to be with what you hated?"

Second, the Buddha discovered the principle of conditionality, or dependent co-arising. This means there is no single cause for any effect, that all events happen because of a coming together of multiple causes. This implies that there is no self as the agent of our deeds who could act as sole cause in bringing about our willed and desired results. This in turn means that all such attempts are necessarily doomed to create suffering, for ourselves and others. It also means that any particular form is inherently destined to change, that no particular form can maintain itself, that none are stable. In other words, nonself, suffering, and impermanence.

How are these two insights connected? Nonself, applied universally, means also Emptiness, which means ontological ambiguity. No one identity always pertains. To exist is to always be changing forms. To be someone is to be turning into someone else. There is no definitive answer to the question of who we are, once and for all. Our Emptiness and nonself are not the exclusion of life and experience and selfhood, a blank; they are, rather, this vast array of ever changing forms of life.

In the many years of his teaching, the Buddha told many tales about past lives, his own and those of others. In the passage above from the *Lotus Sūtra*, however, he tells us that these stories are not to be taken literally. He told whatever stories about the past were necessary to awaken his listeners, to raise questions about their past and future, to put their present experience into an illuminatingly larger context. So in a certain sense these particular details about our past lives, and his, are not literally true. They belong to conventional, not ultimate, truth; however, they are just as true as any other conventional truth. But what has happened here is that the nature of conventional truth has changed: conventional truth turns out to encompass multiple alternate sets of conventional truths rather than one single consistent set of conventional truths: conventional truth now bears within itself the fluidity and interpenetrative transparency of ultimate truth in that it is constantly shifting, rearranging, reorienting itself to the changing needs and perspectives of sentient beings, negating and transforming and reaffirming, each truth turning into other truths and blossoming into its own negation: all conventional truths are rafts to other conventional truths, both the end and the means of all truths: conventional and ultimate truth have converged.

These particular stories, in other words, are forms emerging from the Buddha's own compassion, his present encounter with suffering sentient beings. It is in this that their truth lies—their expression of his present compassion. For in the *Lotus Sūtra* the Buddha also tells us that all of these sentient beings are equal to himself and all will become Buddhas. He further tells us that even before he seemed to be a Buddha, back when he was only a bodhisattva, he was actually already a Buddha. The same applies, then, to us, who will be Buddhas. We appear only to be on the way to Buddhahood, but the way toward Buddhahood is already Buddhahood itself. As he had said in chapter 2 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, "The Buddha himself dwells in the Great Vehicle." All of these past lives of his own or of others are aspects of the present life of the Buddha. His awakening to Buddhahood was an awakening to the inexhaustible array of suffering sentient life, blooming and fading everywhere, together with an insight that none of its identities were fixed for a moment. In these many forms any identity could be seen. To be a Buddha means to see

Buddhahood itself in all of these diverse and inexhaustible forms of life throughout the past and future.

Such is what we sometimes call, loosely, the Buddha's "eternal life." All of his past lives, as beings other than a Buddha, were "true and not false." But on the other hand, all of them were told in just this way, as aspects of his endeavor to liberate sentient beings now, in his already-achieved Buddhahood. We have here the "retroactive" conception of time that is characteristic of the *Lotus Sūtra*, as we saw already in chapter 10. To become a Buddha means that one has always been a Buddha. However, one must become a Buddha in order to have always been a Buddha! To be a Buddha is to have a Buddha-past. To become a Buddha in this moment is to see all other moments, and indeed all other beings, as expressions of Buddhahood. Becoming a Buddha right now makes it so that one has been a Buddha in every moment of the past and future that one considers from the perspective of one's present Buddhahood. To be a Buddha is to see how all forms of being are ways of being a Buddha.

Buddhahood means seeing that although all of us are born with a past, and that we always have a past, that past changes depending on what we are now. Although each of us is finite in space too—I am myself, not another—what others are to me is changed by what I am now. The Buddha, upon attaining Buddhahood, saw that all of those other beings he had formerly been were also Buddhas, aspects, and expressions of his present Buddhahood. He saw that he had been alive as a Buddha even when he was alive as a bodhisattva or as a deluded sentient being.

What does it mean to "recognize yourself in something"? Imagine that you hear a recording of your own voice. It sounds weird, embarrassing, not like how you think of yourself at all. But after a while you recognize what is characteristically "you" in this alien voice. Imagine that you see an old photograph of yourself as a young child. You are dressed in the ridiculous fashion of the day; you are preoccupied with matters that mean nothing to you now. But finally you are able to accept that this is you yourself and absorb it into your current sense of self. Imagine that you see an X-ray of your internal organs. They are slimy, twisted, grotesque—not at all like you think of yourself, not at all what you normally mean when you think the word "I." But finally you come to

recognize that these are most intimately yourself, your true self. Without these strange and non-me-ish things, I would not be me. They are more me than I am. My concept of myself must expand to integrate all of these apparently alien aspects of myself. This is how it is for the Buddha looking upon all sentient beings, looking upon us as we are here today, with all of our strange obsessions, our greeds, our angers, our delusions.

The Buddha's life is "eternal"—unquantifiable, illimitable—because the lives of sentient beings are innumerable, immeasurable. The Buddha's life is present as and in our lives, not outside them. To see the Buddha's eternal life is to see the Buddhahood of our own lives. The Buddha is not eternal as God is sometimes thought to be eternal in monotheistic traditions. He is not independent of sentient beings, and he does not exist with a certain fixed identity within a linear type of time that moves from the past to the present to the future through a series of isolated and determinate moments. Nor is he outside time, atemporal. To see in what sense this is "eternal," even though Buddhism holds firmly to its founding principle that "all conditioned states are impermanent," we must learn to see *time* differently, which is to say, to see our lives differently. To aspire to future Buddhahood changes the past that you presently embody. It is to see the Buddha's life present in all of your own pasts, presents, and futures. That is the Buddha's unquantifiable, immeasurable, eternal life.

Chapter 16 of the *Lotus Sūtra* gives another father-son parable to illustrate this.[19] A doctor goes on a trip. While he's away, his children get into his medicines and recklessly ingest them at random. When the father returns, he finds his children violently ill, frothing at the mouth, inebriated, out of their minds. He sees what medicines they took and immediately prepares the antidote. But the children are too far confused to even heed his instruction to ingest the antidote; he cannot catch them and force it down; they keep spitting it up, running about wildly. So he devises a "skillful means." He departs, leaving the antidote and instructions to take it, telling them he's off on another business trip; then he sends back word to them, announcing to the children that their father has died on the road. The news of their father's death shocks the children back to their senses; all they have left of him is the antidote and his instructions to take it. In their desperation and grief, they finally do so.

Once they are restored to health, the father returns, telling them that he had never really died.

So it is with the Buddha's Nirvana, his extinction, his departure from this world. The Buddha's absence itself is another of his skillful means of teaching; the removal of the beloved father, the sudden bereftness of care and protection, and the subsequent longing for the father produces an enhanced attention to the father as he was in the past, made more present by his absence. His absence is a mode of his presence, his effectiveness in the world, his being here with his children. He is more "there" for them when he is not there, for being "there" to someone, being "present" to them, really just means the power to have an effect on them, and it is his absence that makes them search for him, long for him, and in this way become intensely focused on him, feeling his effect that much more deeply. In fact, both being there and not being there are alternate modes of being there, of doing the Buddha work in the world. For really, as the Buddha says, nothing is either simply there or not there, either present or absent, either thus or otherwise. It is both; it is neither. Being there is a way of being gone; being gone is a way of being there. It is the alternation, the interaction, the skillful deployment of presence and absence that is the true presence. Here the *Lotus Sūtra* offers us yet another new Middle Way: between being and nonbeing, between presence and absence.

THE NEW MIDDLE WAY BETWEEN ACCEPTANCE OF THE PRESENT REALITY AND PROGRESSIVE CHANGE TOWARD AN IDEAL: THE DRAGON GIRL AND THE BODHISATTVA NEVER DISPARAGE

The Buddha said, in the early Buddhist scriptures, that if there were a self, an absolute unconditional soul within the person, the religious life would be either impossible or unnecessary. By definition, an unconditional self cannot change. If it were already perfect, the religious life—and all moral improvement, all striving for progress—would be unnecessary. Nothing else would matter; everything other than this true unconditional self would be just surface illusion and of no consequence. Conversely, if it were imperfect, religion, morality, striving would be

impossible: nothing could change it. But as we saw in chapter 4 of the present text, some forms of the Mahāyāna assert that we are all originally enlightened, that we are equal to the Buddha, that there is nothing to be gained. How can these two opposite points of view be integrated?

The *Lotus Sūtra*, as we've already seen, can be read as including its own peculiar version of the "equal-to-the-Buddha" doctrine in its second chapter, discussed above. But we noted there that this assertion came hand in hand with a wildly exaggerated emphasis on the difference between Buddhas and ordinary folks, the inconceivable superiority of the Buddha. Here too, we find, we have a new Middle Way: between affirmation of the perfection of our present existence, just as it is, and the radical transformation, the confrontation with a kind of incommensurate otherness, toward which one is always striving. The point is made most elegantly in the stories of two of the most famous figures of the *Lotus Sūtra*: the Dragon Girl and the bodhisattva named Never Disparage.

The story of the Dragon Girl has attracted much attention, traditionally regarded as having something to do with affirming the potentiality for Buddhahood of (1) females, (2) nonhumans (she's a *naga*, a serpent-like dragon who lives, in Indian mythology, under the sea), and (3) the innocent and unlearned (we are told she is only eight years old). But readers who stress this egalitarian message have had to deal with the ungainly fact that the story at the same time seems to disparage the present body and condition of the Naga Girl. Unlike some female figures in Mahāyāna lore (one thinks of the goddess in chapter 7 of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*[20]) who are shown to be completely enlightened just as they are, equal to the Buddha in their very female form, the Naga Girl, we are told, *transforms into* a Buddha—that is, the traditional, male, adult, human, resplendent figure of a Buddha. Her little Dragon Girl body is changed into a Buddha's body. The sūtra stresses that it happens instantaneously, but it is still a change, and it seems to imply that such a change is therefore necessary, that the "just as it is" body of the female, of the child, of the animal is incapable of containing Buddhahood.

But if we look at the story in detail, we find that it is making a more profound point, one in keeping with the "new Middle Way" between present perfection and future transformation sketched in the other parts of the sūtra rather than one-sidedly affirming present perfection alone.

We may think here of the first chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*, where the Buddha entered "the meditative domain of Infinite Meanings" ("the Infinite Meanings *samadhi*") and then shined a light from his head that illuminated all sentient beings who were going about their activities. This, we said, was a way of seeing sentient beings as the Buddha sees sentient beings, which is to see them as parts of his own Buddhahood. That is what "the meditative domain of Infinite Meanings" shows us: for all beings to be embraced in the mind of the Buddha means for them to be put into the context of the Buddha's world, the Buddha's experience seen as a Buddha sees them. If you see them as a Buddha sees them, you see them differently. Really, all of that is a simple way of saying all dharmas are the Buddha dharmas; all dharmas seen in the eyes of the Buddha are changed. What we're really talking about is the One Vehicle, which is how the universe looks to a Buddha. When we're talking about yourself in that context, we're talking about how you look in the eyes of the Buddha, or a Buddha, or the Buddha you will become, and all of these practices too, seen in the light of the Buddha's eyes, thrown into the light of the Buddha.

Now, how does the Dragon Girl change what she is? She offers a pearl to the Buddha, and the question is asked, "Is the handoff of this jewel quick?" From my hand to the Buddha's hand, from me to him, as soon as it is in the Buddha's hand, she is a Buddha. In the same amount of time it takes to transfer that from this context to that context. When I take this jewel and put it into a different hand, I'm putting it into a different context. Why is it instantaneous? Because you're not replacing her with another thing; it is simply her herself seen by a Buddha. This jewel she gives to the Buddha, we are told in the sūtra, has the value of the entire three-thousandfold world.[21] It is equivalent to the entire world. Hand that world into the hands of a Buddha, then you are a Buddha.

How are you a Buddha? You are a Buddha by being seen by a Buddha as a Buddha. When you see a Buddha seeing you as a Buddha, that is what you're seeing there in the first chapter in the way you're seeing how the Buddha sees you. To see something in a particular way brings out different aspects of it, and all of these aspects are, in light of the Emptiness idea, no more and no less really a part of that original thing itself than whatever belonged to how you were originally seeing it. How

do I look in the eyes of all you different people right now? I'm a lot of different people right now, and what I'm saying is being understood to have many meanings, maybe not infinite meanings, but at least several meanings. At the same time, however, this does not require me to be saying several different things. And if we had a certain special kind observer in the room, a Buddha, he would be able to see even more meanings: he would see that my remarks about last night's football game are actually rich with implications for the truths of Buddhism: he would see that I'm also, unbeknownst to myself, preaching Buddhism, speaking as a Buddha. This thinking of a Buddha is to think of a Buddha thinking of us, seeing us as Buddhas.

I think we have symbolic representations here of the Infinite Meanings samadhi, illustrated in the first chapter, where the Buddha looks upon the activities of all sentient beings. Now we are going to see what the Buddha sees. That is telling us what the *Lotus Sūtra* is purporting to do, purporting to be: it is how the Buddha sees the rest of the world and showing that to us. In other words, the Dragon Girl is recontextualized. This means a total transformation and at the same time remaining exactly the same. Seeing the Buddha see us as Buddhas recontextualizes us. Without changing in the least, the Dragon Girl is now seen as something utterly different. That is why the story needs to stress both her present condition and its total transformation, affirming both in the instantaneousness of the handoff of the jewel, the always available instant of seeing differently, of recontextualization. It is the Middle Way between the already complete perfection of whatever you happen to be and the total transformation into the exalted state of Buddhahood, affirming both and seeing them as one and the same event.

We find something very similar in the story of the bodhisattva Never Disparage in chapter 20 of the *Lotus Sūtra*. This was a man, we are told, who went around saying to everyone he met, "I dare not disparage you: you are practicing the bodhisattva way, and you will one day be a Buddha."[22] Note that he does not say that *if* you practice the bodhisattva way, *then* you can become a Buddha. He says that what you are doing right now is itself, unbeknownst to you, the bodhisattva way, in keeping with the general point of view of the *Lotus Sūtra* as we've discussed it above. They need not change anything; they can just keep doing as they

are doing. And what are they doing? Well, when they hear this, they get quite annoyed: "We don't need these empty predictions of Buddhahood from this no-account monk (who had no great Buddhist achievements himself, we're told), and anyway we are not even trying to become Buddhas." They deride him and beat him. He *still* says to them: "You will become Buddhas." The story goes on to tell us that he's richly rewarded for this behavior—learns the *Lotus Sūtra*, in fact—and eventually becomes a Buddha. He is a past life of our present Buddha Śākyamuni. His tormentors, as a result of their deeds, descend to tortures in purgatory. But here's the twist: as a result of this, they again encounter him, telling them the same thing—that is, just the *Lotus Sūtra* itself, which is nothing but the declaration "You are all Bodhisattvas"—as a result of which *they* all become Buddhas! So indeed they didn't need to change their behavior at all, including rejecting and tormenting him. It led to purgatory, to be sure, but that in turn led to Buddhahood.

Note that here again we have the Middle Way: you don't need to change at all, but by hearing precisely this, you are changed completely, first to anger and purgatory, then to Buddhas. The very statement "You are practicing the bodhisattva way"—in other words, the teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* itself—is the recontextualization of those deeds, which simultaneously affirms them exactly as they are and radically transforms them.

THE NEW MIDDLE WAY BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL: DEVADATTA

It is noteworthy that in the story of the doctor, it is precisely the medicines of the father that make the children sick in the first place: the healing potions, the skillful means of the Buddha, the wisdom of enlightenment, taken in the wrong way and at the wrong time, are actually the cause of our ordinary delusion. In fact, the whole world is the Buddha's enlightenment, but our delusion is just this enlightenment impacted, wrongly construed, poisoning us rather than liberating us due to improper dosage, timing, usage. The implication is that all that we consider delusive and evil, all of our own worst habits and misconceptions, all of our life of suffering is, if seen rightly, the life and enlightenment of the Buddha itself.

And indeed, the *Lotus Sūtra* touches on this point as well. Chapter 12, a sort of supplement to the original Kumārajīva translation, is titled "Devadatta." Devadatta is a sort of Judas figure of Buddhism: the Buddha's cousin, who repeatedly attempted to assassinate him, creating a rival monastic group, and shedding the Buddha's blood. Devadatta is the figure of the extremist evil in Buddhism, guilty of the most heinous sins. In this chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra* we are told that long, long ago, Devadatta was actually the present Buddha's teacher. In fact, it is solely because of the good spiritual friendship of Devadatta that the Buddha was able to attain enlightenment and Buddhahood. What is more, Devadatta, who in the present is purest evil in both thought and deed, will become a Buddha in the future, just like all the other people discussed in the sūtra. Once again we have a present (evil) recontextualized by a Buddhific past and a Buddhific future and thus given a new significance. Even evil, the most extreme contrast to Buddhahood, is a cause of Buddhahood, an expression of Buddhahood, an aspect of Buddhahood.

It is worth noting that when the *Lotus Sūtra* was written, the rival sect established by Devadatta still existed in India, still functioned as a competing ideology to Buddhism. In affirming the integration of Devadatta within Buddhahood, the *Lotus Sūtra* takes a stand on the relation between conflicting ideologies, conflicting worldviews, conflicting practices and values. The sūtra's implications for rethinking this issue are of crucial importance for its impact on Tiantai thought and are also among its most revolutionary and relevant in their modern implications. In the next chapter we will unpack some of these implications.

SEVEN

THE INTERPERVASION OF ALL POINTS OF VIEW

From the *Lotus Sūtra* to Tiantai

WHAT ARE WE TO MAKE OF OUR FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS AND the bewildering variety of alien worldviews and strange modes of behavior that seem to bedevil them? How shall we account for, and exist comfortably and responsibly in the midst of, these people who believe and behave in a way that is so uncongenial to our own, so contrary to our deepest intuitions and commitments, perhaps even in ways that appear to us ridiculous, stupid, or evil? How should people who are deeply committed to certain beliefs about the world and the purpose of human life, about what is good and bad, about what is true and false—about what really matters to them—treat and regard those who have radically different beliefs?

One common approach people sometimes take to this problem, when they feel certain that they are in possession of the truth, assuming that truth and falsehood are mutually exclusive and that truth is in every case preferable to falsehood, is to make strenuous efforts to eliminate error and bring their benighted brethren, by persuasion or other means, to recognize it. Let us call this attitude, whether philosophical or religious, "proselytizing dogmatism." Alternately, we might acknowledge that our limited cognitive capacities disqualify us from absolute certainty, even of our firmest beliefs, and thus renounce our faith in them, eschewing any attempt to arrive at a universally valid truth. Let us call this position, whether philosophical or religious, "nihilistic skepticism." Or we might conclude that all beliefs are of equal value, holding that our own views (including this one) are no more correct than any others. Let's call that

"tolerant relativism." Another alternative is to bracket, but not abandon, our deepest beliefs and counsel a de facto truce with those who hold other beliefs, with or without an attitude of respect for them, leaving the unresolvable issues out of the discussion and concentrating instead on those matters on which all agree, perhaps provisionally evaluating other beliefs in terms of their usefulness in attaining agreed-upon practical aims, assuming there are any. Let us call this position, philosophical or religious, "agnostic pragmatism."

The ethical and philosophical problems entailed in each of these positions are well known, and I will not dwell upon them here. The *Lotus Sūtra* can be read in a variety of ways that, depending on what aspect is stressed, can land us in any of these positions. But if read in the way traditional Tiantai interpreters have understood it, this sūtra suggests a position that is significantly different from all of them.

The *Lotus Sūtra* is, in a sense, a teaching about teachings, about how various teachings and practices and desires fit together. It begins with a focus on how the doctrines and practices of the śrāvakas (or "Hīnayāna") fit into what appears to be a contrary teaching and practice, that of the bodhisattvas (or Mahāyāna). The śrāvakas are, it says, actually bodhisattvas, unbeknownst to themselves, and their doctrines and practices are parts of the bodhisattva way that contribute to bringing it to fruition for themselves and others. This scope is gradually expanded in the *Lotus Sūtra*, finally enfolding even Devadatta, the founder of a hostile rival sect. Here too we learn that his practice is a portion, in some sense, of the bodhisattva practice. The *Lotus Sūtra* provides a template with which to rethink how holders of one view can regard holders of another view. It is an idea about ideas and about what it means for different ideas to "contradict" one another, or to "be included" in a larger idea, or to "be versions of" or "extensions of" one another. We can quickly see the relevance of this kind of reflection on some of the most common and pressing concerns of our ordinary life, living as we do amid all of these other people with other viewpoints and other religions and desires and needs. It is astonishing, isn't it? It is the question we face every day whenever we interact with another person.

PROSELYTIZING SECTARIAN ONE-UPMANSHIP?

The first few chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra*, as we have seen, focus intensely on the intramural relations between two groups of Buddhist believers: the śrāvakas (and pratyekabuddhas) and the bodhisattvas, or more generally what came to be called the Hīnayāna and the Mahāyāna, in the parlance of the latter.[1] It may at first glance seem a stretch to use the sūtra's handling of this relationship as a paradigm for the relation between all sets of alternate beliefs about the world, since the two groups in question share certain non-negligible core beliefs: all believe in the authority and unsurpassed virtue and wisdom of the Buddha, for example; accept the general cosmological framework in which it is set; and regard as true, at least in some sense, certain specifically Buddhist teachings (the Four Noble Truths, dependent co-arising, and the like). The narrowest interpretation of the intent of the *Lotus Sūtra* would perhaps insist that it merely asserts that the Mahāyāna is the true and complete understanding of the mutually acknowledged teachings, while the Hīnayāna is a distorted or partial understanding, or perhaps even a pernicious and false one. This would have little to tell us about interfaith relations or the general issue of how people who embrace radically different beliefs ought to regard one another. It would amount to no more than an assertion by a certain sect of a certain religion that it alone possessed the true interpretation of its tradition, while rival sects were of lesser or no value or were even dangerous enemies of the truth. The implicit assumption is that Buddhism as such possesses the truth, while other religions or beliefs are nonstarters, not even worth mentioning in the debate.

There are, of course, a lot of good reasons not to understand the sūtra in this way, as we have seen: its reference to broader Mahāyāna ideas about Emptiness that undermine fixed and independent identities; its focus on "skillful means" as a repeated revising of previous assumptions about range and meaning of various teachings; its self-referential instructions on how to read the text that are embedded within it; and its evocation of ever broader spatiotemporal contexts as a decisive factor in gauging the ultimate identity of persons and practices. One of the principal techniques of the *Lotus Sūtra* is the imaginative evocation of

huge spans of time, in the context of which the character and meaning of particular events and persons are to be reevaluated. This is one of the ways it makes possible the attribution of dual identities to some of its protagonists; viewed within a narrower temporal (and sometimes spatial) context they are to be viewed in one way, but in the larger context they are to be viewed another way. A short-term śrāvaka may be a long-term bodhisattva or Buddha. This allows a single person, teaching, or practice to be tagged with multiple identities. Following this precedent we may perhaps be forgiven for adopting the principle of judging not only according to short-term effects but also, simultaneously, in terms of long-term effects, even when these two are apparently contradictory. The *Lotus Sūtra* asks us to view our ideological opponents, like its own assertions, within the largest possible context. But this can be understood in a number of ways, some more radical than others. Let's take a look at where the sūtra leads us.

GLOBAL PROSELYTIZING ONE-UPMANSHIP? NON-BUDDHISTS AS POTENTIAL BUDDHISTS

The first ten chapters of the *Lotus Sūtra* expand on the implications and application of the discussion of this issue. This process seems at first to remain a purely Buddhist affair, studiedly sticking to the śrāvaka problem and stopping short of speaking of adherents to other belief systems as such, or human beings in general, in spite of its expansion. Gradually, most explicitly in chapters 5 and 7, the sūtra expands its scope to draw an unequivocal parallel between the case of the śrāvakas and that of all sentient beings; if the former are on the road to Buddhahood, the latter are as well. All sentient beings are in the same boat as the śrāvakas.

But what kind of boat is that? As noted earlier, a passage in chapter 10 offers a specification on this point, suggesting that whatever the sūtra is claiming about the Hīnayāna believers is also claimed of anyone who hears its teaching preached by those who enjoy it for even a moment.[2] That is, whoever hears it attains Supreme Awakening, becomes a Buddha. The sūtra does not say that listeners must be Buddhists, nor even that they must accept the teaching, share its preachers' pleasure in it, or even, as in chapter 2, distractedly bow their heads slightly to it. Indeed,

it does not even say they must be humans; the sole condition is that they *hear* the dharma. Nothing is said here about their reaction to it. This suggests that whatever it is that the sūtra is saying about the relation between groups of people with different beliefs, it is at least not limited to present believers in some form of Buddhism.

However, it still seems to hinge precisely on the teaching of the Buddhist dharma itself, remaining, we may feel, quite narrow in its application. The text does not assert the same about those who do not at least hear the dharma. Assuming that "dharma" here means specifically the teachings of Buddhism as presented in the scriptures that putatively describe the words and deeds of Śākyamuni Buddha, this still means that Buddhism is the unique source of all truth, whether or not it requires that one believes in it at the moment of hearing it. The correct attitude to take toward those who embrace other beliefs, then, would be to view them as potential believers in Buddhism. This would perhaps fit nicely with a kind of expanded proselytizing dogmatism, seeing all beings as a raw material to be shaped into a Buddhist image or as a field in which seeds of Buddhism are to be sown. All holders of other beliefs are to be seen as potential Buddhists.

Applying the śrāvaka/bodhisattva/Buddha relation here, since chapter 2 of the *Lotus Sūtra* tells us that any who interact with the Buddha's dharmas become Buddhas, we can assert that they are not only potential Buddhists, but also that after they become Buddhists of whatever kind, they can become Buddhas. All beings are thus to be seen *potential Buddhas*, to be made into *actual Buddhas* by preaching the Buddhist dharma to them.

NON-BUDDHISTS AS YOUNG BUDDHAS IN THEIR FORMATIVE STAGE

One of the distinctive features of the *Lotus Sūtra*'s handling of the bodhisattva/śrāvaka relation, however, is that the śrāvakas are not merely *potentially* Buddhists, bodhisattvas, and Buddhas; we are assured, instead, that they are *certain* to become Buddhas. Belief in Buddhism, then, in any form, already entails the assurance of future Buddhahood. If this were as far as it went, when the claim is expanded to non-Buddhists in

chapter 10, the correct attitude would be to view them not merely as *potential believers in Buddhism*, and henceforth *potential Buddhas*, but definitively as *future Buddhists*, and equally definitively, as certain to be *future Buddhas*.

This point already alters the picture considerably, because a Buddha is something much more than a Buddhist believer. He is a source of Buddhist teachings, the ultimate authority on their meaning, the embodiment of the highest value, an object rather than a subject of faith. To Mahāyāna believers, he is also what one ultimately and most fervently aspires to become. To regard holders of other beliefs as future Buddhas, while oneself worshipping a Buddha and aspiring to Buddhahood, is to regard them as nascent forms of what one is oneself currently worshipping, nascent forms of the source of one's own beliefs, and of the object of one's highest aspiration, a nascent form of precisely what one values most highly, to which one is oneself beholden and subservient.

NON-BUDDHIST PRACTICES AS CAUSES OF FUTURE BUDDHAHOOD

But this is not all the *Lotus Sūtra* tells us about the relation between Hīnayāna practitioners and bodhisattvas, which is the model we are extrapolating to the relation between Buddhists and non-Buddhists. It teaches that the Hīnayāna practices are actually part of the One Vehicle that leads with certainty to Buddhahood eventually.[3] The Hīnayāna practices are actually *part* of the bodhisattva path. *The Hīnayāna paths of śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas are separated out of the One Vehicle as a skillful means and presented separately as if they were the final end, precisely because this alone would allow these particular types of living beings to finally reach Buddhahood. If it had been preached any other way—that is, if they had been told directly that they were to practice the One Vehicle—they would not have been able to do so.* This statement has two crucial implications: first of all, it means that their Hīnayāna beliefs (presumably including the belief that they are not practicing the bodhisattva path and that Nirvana is their ultimate goal) and practices are themselves among what leads to their eventual Buddhahood. That is, these beliefs and practices are not only among the things a formative Buddha is found

to have been thinking and doing in his youth; his thinking and doing these Hīnayāna things are also among the causes of his eventual achievement of Buddhahood.

Extending this relation between different sects of Buddhists to the case of the Buddhist/non-Buddhist relation, it would mean that the holding of the non-Buddhist beliefs and undertaking of the concomitant practices are among the causes that make one capable of becoming a Buddhist and are among the causes of eventual Buddhahood.

NON-BUDDHIST PRACTICES AS CAUSES OF FUTURE BUDDHAHOOD *BECAUSE* THEY ARE NON-BUDDHIST

There is a second, much more profound, implication to the italicized statement in the section above. It means not only that those non-bodhisattva (Buddha-cause) practices are actually parts of the bodhisattva vehicle that leads to Buddhahood—in other words, that they too are causes of Buddhahood. It means also that they are causes of Buddhahood precisely because they are *not explicitly* causes of Buddhahood. That is, in the case of those persons who for some reason do not want to undertake bodhisattva practices, who are not interested in becoming Buddhas and do nothing to cause themselves to become Buddhas, the nonself-identifying-as-bodhisattva practice they do undertake is actually bodhisattva practice *because* it is not explicitly bodhisattva practice. It has to be different in both form and content from explicit bodhisattva practice to be something they can practice at that time, in their present condition. It is precisely because of the practices whose explicit aim excludes becoming Buddhas that they accomplish their bodhisattva practice, that they eventually become Buddhas. Many of the parables in the early part of the sūtra illustrate this idea of necessary indirection or inexplicitness as the necessary (though not sufficient) condition of attaining an end (the children in the burning house get out and receive the great ox cart precisely *because* they are not trying to avoid getting burned and not trying to get a great ox cart; the lost son comes to accept his exalted identity *because* he accepts his lowly tasks as appropriate to himself; the travelers reach the treasure *because* they are trying to reach the phantom city rather than the treasure, and so on). If we extend

this to the interfaith case, it would mean that non-Buddhist practices are effective formative practices of a nascent Buddha *because* they are non-Buddhist.

A MUSICAL METAPHOR

Let's say I am a musician and aspiring composer who worships Mozart. I practice all day, playing Mozart's masterpieces, deeply moved by their perfection. They are the model I keep in mind while making my own still meager attempts at composition. I want to attain a similar position as a master composer and devote all of my efforts to that goal, which alone gives meaning to my life.

What shall I think of, say, a person who enjoys only the music of the Sex Pistols? I can say, "To each his own; there is no accounting for taste." That would be the tolerant relativist position. Or I can say, "Even this person can sometimes come to appreciate Mozart." That would be the "potential Buddha" position. Perhaps I feel it is even my duty to persuade the person to give it a try, which would add the dimension of proselytizing.

The "potential Buddha" position marks quite a shift in my attitude. The equivalent here would be to say, "This Sex Pistols fan can not only learn to appreciate Mozart some day; he can also himself thereafter become a master composer equaling Mozart himself. He too can be a Mozart." The Sex Pistols fan perhaps did not even aspire to become a Johnny Rotten; he was content to appreciate, enjoy, and worship Johnny Rotten. Now we assert that he can become not only a Johnny Rotten but also something that is, in our own view although not in his current view, much greater: Mozart himself.

But the "certain future Buddha" position is an even bigger leap. This would mean to regard the Sex Pistols fan as Mozart in his youth. There would seem to be no equivalent to this in ordinary life, as we never have the kind of sure knowledge of the future suggested by the certainty of the Buddha's assurances of Buddhahood in the *Lotus Sūtra*. The closest we can get is watching a biopic we have seen before, knowing the outcome in advance: this child in these early scenes is the great man we will see accomplishing great things. To get a little closer, we must have recourse to a science fiction scenario: somehow I, the aspiring Mozart

wannabe, have been magically transported back in time into the kindergarten class of Wolfgang Amadeus himself. It turns out he's a huge Sex Pistols fan! Who knew? When I see the Sex Pistols fan, I should feel as if I were standing face-to-face with the young Mozart himself, my idol, in the flesh, still in his formative stage.

The "causes of future Buddhahood" position goes even further. It means I must see his current practice (listening, stoned, to "God Save the Queen" at maximum volume on his iPod) and beliefs ("this is the most awesome tune") as among the causes that enable him finally to become a Mozart. Here I should not only regard him with the fascinated awe and respect I would feel if I were face-to-face with someone I knew to be the young Mozart. I must also guard against thinking that his current fascination with the Sex Pistols is a regrettable or anomalous stage that will fortunately fall away, a negligible peripheral moment that he will outgrow and that he is, fortunately, strong enough not to have been too influenced by. Rather, I must see his current pleasure in the Sex Pistols, and all of his own beliefs about this pleasure and its ultimacy, as among the things that make him who I already know he is destined to become. It is *because* he is into the Sex Pistols now that eventually he will be a great classical composer. It is not only his person that we should regard with fascinated awe; the things he believes in and enjoys and does should also be viewed with the same fascinated awe. We should love not only the heretic, as a potential convert, but the heresy as well. We should look upon his passive pleasure in Johnny Rotten as a way the active skills of a Mozart were already developing.

INTERFAITH APPLICATION

If we can transfer this artistic metaphor to the case of religions, the *Lotus Sūtra* in this sense would be enjoining Buddhists to view, say, Hindus, Jews, Christians, and Muslims not only as potential Buddhists, nor only as potential Buddhas, but as young Śākyamunis, still in their formative stage. Further, we must view their Hindu beliefs and practices, Jewish beliefs and practices, Christian beliefs and practices, Muslim beliefs and practices, as among the causes that allow them to become Śākyamunis. Buddhists must see that when they obey, fear, and love Yahweh or Jesus

or Allah—not even daring to aspire to *become* these "lesser" deities, but only wishing to obey them—it is part of what enables them to finally *become* something Buddhists themselves regard as much greater than Yahweh or Jesus or Allah: to become a Buddha.

NOT QUITE PANTHEISM, NOT QUITE RELATIVISM

Still, a nascent form of my highest value may or may not merit my respect, particularly if it is also the case that in order to reach the state of actually instantiating my highest value, the believer in other values must first be converted to believe as I do by myself or others of my creed. The universal approval of all heresies as causes of final Buddhahood precisely because they are heresies (non-Buddhist beliefs and practices), to which our analysis has brought us so far, may seem to be a form of tolerant relativism. But the emphasis on teaching, spreading, and hearing the dharma—the Buddhist dharma, or the *Lotus Sūtra* itself—throughout the text belies this understanding. For it is still implied that it would be much better if all of these people could explicitly be Buddhists and then, among Buddhists, those who knew themselves to be in the process of becoming Buddhas. Non-Buddhist beliefs and practices are indeed causes of Buddhahood precisely because they are non-Buddhist, *but only for those who are not yet ready to be explicit Buddhists and Buddhas*. Thus far it is still necessary *eventually* to become explicit Buddhists and explicit Buddhas, and this explicit identity is uniquely privileged. It is superior to any other explicit identity and claims to possess a unique relationship to ultimate truth. The impetus to proselytize, if we get just this far and no further, may be greatly enhanced rather than diminished, leaving us with a distinctive but nonetheless unmistakable form of proselytizing dogmatism.

The *Lotus Sūtra* has indeed been read in this way and understandably so. More than perhaps any other Buddhist text, it harps on the need for propagating the dharma and, more specifically, itself. In chapter 2, "Skillful Means," we are told of many practices that are quite a bit less exalted, or less similar to standard Mahāyāna goals and practices, than even those of the śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas—doodling a Buddha-image by children at play, a single inattentive "Namo Buddha" uttered

to an image or memorial to the Buddha—and we are assured that all of these actions, too, are parts of the One Vehicle and that each and every being who has done so has eventually become a Buddha. But it is to be noted that without exception these small deeds have some relation to an explicit image of Buddhism per se: a stupa, a Buddha-image, and so on. The most we can conclude from this passage is that any contact with Buddhism at all, and indeed any slight positive attitude or response to that contact at all, assures one of Buddhahood. The passage already quoted from chapter 10 about merely "hearing" the dharma goes a step further: we are not told there of any response, much less a positive response. But having had contact with the dharma is still a prerequisite for the status of "young Buddha in a still formative state." We cannot even be sure, thus far, that our extension of the śrāvaka/bodhisattva relation to all Buddhist/non-Buddhist relations is really implied by the text, because it may be that only those behaviors and cognitions that have at least some relation to Buddhism—to in some sense "meeting Buddhas," as the text likes to say—count as causes of eventual Buddhahood.

What this would leave us with is (1) an affirmation that all non-Buddhist practices are causes of Buddhahood, precisely because they are non-Buddhist, and on the other hand (2) the absolute necessity of preaching explicit Buddhahood, at the right time and place, as the sine qua non of accomplishing Buddhahood. This means that all practices are "right," but that Buddhism as an institution is supremely necessary. The first position is something like a radicalized pantheism (not only are all entities divine and thus good, but all deeds and cognitions are causes of realizing this goodness, even those that deny it) and, as such, a ne plus ultra of tolerant relativism. The second position is something like a radicalized absolutist fundamentalism (only Buddhism saves, and the most important endeavor in the world, the sole locus of real value, is to try to convert others to Buddhism) and, as such, a ne plus ultra of proselytizing dogmatism. This is perhaps coherent in its own terms, given what we have established so far, and it already constitutes a unique contribution to the question of interfaith dialogue: a way to combine the most extreme tolerance and the most extreme dogmatism in a single item. But is this the final word on the matter offered by the *Lotus Sūtra*?

WHAT IS "THE DHARMA" THAT MUST BE HEARD?

There are several factors that can help give us a richer understanding of this teaching, decisively altering the practical implications of the sūtra's position on this matter. First is the question of what "the dharma" actually refers to. Does "dharma" here refer to a certain set of doctrines, ideas, beliefs, or practices, Buddhist or otherwise? A reader of the Chinese text of Kumārajīva's translation might have reasons to think not. One is the claim, also in chapter 2 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, that "throughout the worlds in the ten directions of the universe, there are not even two vehicles, much less three,"[4] or even more emphatically, "Throughout the lands of the Buddhas in the ten directions, there exists only the dharma of the One Vehicle; there is neither a second nor a third, except as spoken by a Buddha as a skillful means."[5] Read in context these statements might mean merely that what appear to be other vehicles of Buddhism are in fact parts of the One Vehicle of the Mahāyāna. "Dharma" here would mean "Buddha dharma," the teachings of the Buddha. But read literally, the word "*fa*" in the original Chinese sentence translated here easily lends itself to being taken in its more global phenomenological sense—that is, as "dharmas," or all elements of experience. That would mean that the One Vehicle is all that exists in the universe, that the universe itself is the One Vehicle. All dharmas are nothing but the One Vehicle.

This reading is strongly supported by one of the most momentous lines in the sūtra. In the verse section of the second chapter, Śākyamuni says that he presented the teaching of Nirvana as the end of all suffering to his Hīnayāna disciples as a skillful means. This kind of Nirvana, however, is not the true Nirvana; the elimination of suffering, and the end of samsara, is not what Nirvana, "tranquil extinction," really means. Instead, Śākyamuni says, "All dharmas from the beginning have constantly [been] attributes of tranquil extinction—i.e., of Nirvana."[6] The dharmas in this sentence are unambiguously the plural, global, phenomenal dharmas: all elements of experience without exception. But as written, this sentence seems to have no full verb. This presents three interpretive possibilities.

1. "All dharmas, from the outset, themselves [i.e., naturally, just as they are, without having to be further 'extinguished'] *possess* the attribute of tranquil extinction." That is, one of the attributes, perhaps the crucial or sole attribute, of all dharmas is the character of tranquil extinction, of being "Nirvanic" already, since "tranquil extinction" is a literal translation of the meaning of "Nirvana."

2. "All dharmas, from the outset, are nothing but the one single attribute: tranquil extinction." That is, what they really are is the Nirvanic nature of Emptiness and tranquil extinction and nothing besides; all of their apparent particularities, their arisings, perishings, and differences from one another and differences from Nirvana are not real.

3. "All dharmas, from the outset, *are themselves* eternally the attributes of tranquil extinction." That is, all of their particularities, their arisings, perishings, and differences from one another and from Nirvana are in fact what Nirvana really is.

This reading is both grammatically and doctrinally similar to a key line in the "Innumerable Meanings Sūtra," a Chinese text that sums up the crucial meaning of the *Lotus Sūtra*, often serving traditionally as a sort of preface to the latter: "Innumerable meanings are generated by a single dharma. That dharma is simply freedom from [any single fixed] attribute. Such freedom from fixed attribute enables every attribute without exception to be attributed, manifests every manifestation. Being predicable neither by attributes nor by the exclusion of attributes, this is called the 'real attribute.'"[7] The meaning here is that each and every dharma is a way that tranquil extinction manifests or shows itself. To see a dharma, a determinate something, is to see one of the faces of Nirvana, one of its characteristics, one of its attributes. All things are attributes of Nirvana. True Nirvana is not a blank, not the extinction of experience, but rather possessed of infinite characteristics—namely, all features of sentient experience.

Thus, for our purposes, the second and third readings of the line amount to more or less the same thing: all observed traits, attributes, characteristics, and determinations are ways the true Nirvana shows itself. True Nirvana is what a Buddha has realized, is beyond determination with a particular set of dualistic distinctions; all distinctions,

however, express it. Since "the Buddha himself dwells in the Great Vehicle," this would suggest the conclusion that all objects of experience are themselves parts of the One Vehicle. To have contact with the dharma of the One Vehicle, then, would be simply to have any experience whatsoever—that is, to be a sentient being.

This is the reading that prevails in East Asian interpretations of the *Lotus Sūtra*. Following this interpretation, all phenomena in the universe are themselves the "One Vehicle," which the Buddha himself dwells in, other than which nothing exists. Therefore "to have contact with the dharma" would be synonymous with simply being in the world at all. To have contact with the dharma is "to be a sentient being."

NOT THAT ALL DHARMAS ARE OR ARE NOT ONE VEHICLE: ALL DHARMAS MAY BE READ AS THE ONE VEHICLE

We can comprehend from the above discussion, how we might be able to understand the sūtra to be asserting that all phenomena without exception literally are the One Vehicle. But if all dharmas literally *are* the One Vehicle, and if contact with this One Vehicle is all that is required to guarantee future Buddhahood, we would expect the sūtra to advocate a position similar to that we have caricatured as tolerant relativism: all beings are already in contact with the One Vehicle; all are already assured of Buddhahood; whatever opinions they embrace, or practices they undertake, or experiences they undergo are causes of this Buddhahood. The *Lotus Sūtra*, then, would have talked itself out of a job; there would be no need to teach it, since it is already being taught everywhere. This is, of course, emphatically *not* the position we find taken in the text. On the contrary, as already noted, the *Lotus Sūtra* speaks incessantly of the need to uphold and propagate it energetically and incessantly, to the point of raising serious suspicions that it is ultimately an exemplar of proselytizing dogmatism. How is this apparent contradiction to be resolved?

In chapter 19 we find the claim that for anyone who upholds the *Lotus Sūtra*, "all of the various teachings he may preach, however his mind may approach and explain them, are consistent with the ultimate reality. If he speaks of a secular text, or words about governing the world, or

about the work of making a living, all accord with the true dharma. . . . Whatever this person may think, whatever calculations he may make, whatever words he may say, all are the Buddha dharma, and all have already been preached in the sūtras of past Buddhas."[8] Here we seem to have another passage pointing to all dharmas, all experiences, all ideas, all practices without exception as parts of the One Vehicle. However, it must be noted that the text seems to take pains to not *quite* assert that all of these dharmas *are* the One Vehicle; instead, it presents the assertion that "all are the One Vehicle" as itself *contingent upon* someone actually upholding the *Lotus Sūtra*. To the upholder of the Lotus Sūtra, all beliefs are part of the *Lotus Sūtra*. If "*Lotus Sūtra*" is meant in its expanded sense, as elucidated above, this qualification becomes meaningless and does not help us explain the sūtra's insistence on its own propagation. If it is taken in the narrow sense, however, meaning this particular Buddhist teaching of the One Vehicle (though clearly not this particular Buddhist text as such), we have another problem. For now the meaning is that when someone preaches the *Lotus Sūtra*, everything he says is the *Lotus Sūtra*. We can take this to mean simply that all things are at least *interpretable* as parts of the One Vehicle. To make them actually function as the One Vehicle, however, some explicit contact with the Buddhist teaching that all is or can be the One Vehicle is necessary. For an upholder of the *Lotus Sūtra*, all things are the One Vehicle. In themselves are they or are they not the One Vehicle? Here the sūtra's position is consistent with the teaching of Emptiness: they neither are nor are not. "Dualistic distinctions" like "is or is not" cannot do justice to the real attributes of all dharmas. As chapter 16 says, dharmas are neither "thus nor otherwise"—neither the way they appear nor, definitively, any other way. Things are not definitively one way or another. This also means that they are susceptible to being interpreted in any way whatsoever, and, ipso facto, all are interpretable as parts of the One Vehicle. What enables one to interpret all dharmas as the One Vehicle is to come into contact with the idea that "all dharmas are interpretable as the One Vehicle"—in other words, to come into contact with the actual teaching of the One Vehicle in (some version of) the actual *Lotus Sūtra*. This accounts for the seeming convergence of tolerant relativism and proselytizing dogmatism in the sūtra.

A CRUCIAL FURTHER REVERSAL

Although all things are now seeable as Buddha-dharmas, as aspects of Buddhahood, we must still meet a preacher of explicit Buddhism in order to see the Buddhaness of all dharmas. This is still quite one-sided if we have a fixed and exclusive notion of what this Buddhaness, this attribute of Buddhadharmishness, actually is. But this is where the *Lotus Sūtra* gets really interesting. We saw above that the sūtra makes the strange assertion that the activity and wisdom of a Buddha—rather than the silence, stillness, non-creation of karma, and cessation of suffering of the śrāvaka—are the "true extinction." This can be justified philosophically, although the sūtra itself does not attempt to do so, in spite of the fact that it does assert, as we saw above, that all dharmas, in their activity and multiplicity are, or at least possess, the character of Nirvanic "extinction." (All Tiantai ontology can be considered an attempt to spell out in just what way multiplicity and activity are themselves the true quiescence, more truly quiescent than the one-sided elimination of characteristics. It is precisely this one-sidedness that is the essence of all "activity," that is brought to an end. In essence it would require more "work" to enforce total stillness and blankness than the multifarious flux of the world as we know it.) Buddhahood, we are told, is the *real* "extinction." But "extinction" in its literal sense is a word denoting the explicit ideal not of bodhisattvas, but of śrāvakas! To attain Buddhahood is to attain, in its true sense, the stated ideal of the non-bodhisattvas, of śrāvakas. When we say they will be Buddhas, we mean they will truly fulfill *their own* ideals. When they realize they are not just arhats, but bodhisattvas, they become, as the text says later, not "non-arhats," but "truly arhats."

This point must be considered carefully if we are to avoid a potentially very disappointing result. For what would happen if, say, a Christian were to imagine a Jew converting to Christianity and then declaring, "Only now am I a true Jew!" It would mean that all other Jews, Jews who do not recognize that they are Christians, are not real Jews, that they had not fulfilled the real covenant of the Jews, which could be attained only in Christianity. It is doubtful that this would encourage a more fruitful interfaith dialogue between Jews and Christians. We might similarly imagine a Muslim saying to a Christian, "Only when you have converted

to Islam will you truly be a Christian—that is, a follower of Jesus. Only when you reject the idea that Jesus is the Son of God will you be truly following Jesus, for Jesus was a Muslim who rejected the idea of God having a son." Again, this would hardly encourage interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims. Is the *Lotus Sūtra* suggesting something similar when it has the śrāvakas declare, after identifying themselves not as śrāvakas, but as bodhisattvas? This is certainly suggested by a passage in chapter 2, where the Buddha declares:

> If a disciple of mine declares himself an arhat or pratyekabuddha, but has not heard or realized that all Buddha-Tathāgatas teach and transform only bodhisattvas, this person is not my disciple, is not an arhat, is not a pratyekabuddha. Again, Śariputra, any monk or nun who declares that he or she has already attained arhatship, that this is his or her last embodiment, that he or she has fully realized Nirvana and will not further seek supreme awakening, you should understand that this person is an arrogant false claimant. For it is impossible for a monk who has genuinely attained arhatship to fail to believe in this teaching.[9]

The text goes on to offer one exception: the case where the monk in question has had no opportunity to even encounter this teaching. Any self-proclaimed śrāvaka who encounters it (the teaching that he is not only a śrāvaka but also a bodhisattva) but does not believe it is therefore not a true śrāvaka. Read in isolation, this passage suggests that true śrāvakahood should include the wisdom to recognize that śrāvakahood is non-ultimate and that any śrāvakahood that holds to the ideals of śrāvakahood without subordinating them to the anti-śrāvaka values of bodhisattvahood is outside the pale, not even really a Buddhist. The value of śrāvakahood as śrāvakahood, if it stubbornly refuses integration into Buddhahood when given the chance, is here denigrated to an extreme degree: it is utterly valueless. This clashes sharply with the crypto-pantheistic "all dharmas are the One Vehicle" reading we have suggested above and would seem to be another example of the extreme form of dogmatic proselytism.

But here again, this is not the whole picture. First we should note that the sūtra incessantly insists that bodhisattvas and Buddhas continue to *produce* śrāvakas. On the one hand, they deliberately manifest as śrāvakas, as anti-bodhisattvas, as part of their own bodhisattva work.[10] True, this would mean that any śrāvakas one might meet should

be treated with the respect one should give a bodhisattva (equivalently, all Jews or Muslims should be treated as elect Christians, or even as Christs)—not only because they *might* be a bodhisattva but also because the sūtra has already asserted that *all* śrāvakas are really bodhisattvas: there are no śrāvaka disciples at all. But this is still a matter of an "inner versus outer" contrast in the traditional Mahāyāna sense; they know full well in secret that they are not śrāvakas, but they continue to show themselves to others as śrāvakas. Perhaps a little more striking is the repeated depiction of the Buddhalands to be achieved by various figures in the sūtra to whom the assurance of Buddhahood is made; again and again we are told, beamingly, about how numerous the śrāvaka disciples there will be. It would seem that śrāvakahood is not cut off, ever, but is a permanent and permanently approved feature of the universe, of the bodhisattva way, of the work of Buddhahood. The equivalent would be if a Christian's work, or Christ's own work, were both to continuously appear as a Jew or a Muslim and to produce many students who were self-professed Jews and Muslims—in this case, not secretly Christians, but themselves fully believing they were non-Christians. The Christian should teach some of his students to be non-Christian, the Jew should teach some of his students not to be Jewish, and so on. But here too things have gone no further than a temporary device; the claim can still be made that this is a temporary expedient means, eventually to lead them to abandon their śrāvaka status, as we seem to have seen śrāvakas do earlier in the sūtra when told that all along they had been bodhisattvas *instead*. Thus far we still have some margin of one-sidedness or superiority still granted to the bodhisattvas as bodhisattvas.

The truly radically egalitarian or intersubsumptive implications for religious identity, or identity as such, are really only manifest when the sūtra gives a more searching explanation of just what it means to "truly" be a śrāvaka or arhat. Śrāvakas aspire to be arhats and achieve quiescence. The *Lotus Sūtra* says that when they realize that they are actually not śrāvakas, that there is no arhatship to be achieved, that there is no final quiescence, they are finally "truly śrāvakas," "truly arhats," achieving the "true quiescence." It puts forth this astonishing claim by means of what seems to be an outrageous set of puns. "Śrāvaka" means "voice-hear"—meaning, initially, those disciples who have personally "heard"

the "voice" of Buddha Śākyamuni preaching the dharma. To be a bodhisattva is to make the Buddha's "voice heard" *universally*. "Arhat" means "worthy of offerings." Now that they are bodhisattvas, they are worthy of offering from all, *universally*.[11] True quiescence, as we saw above, is the ultimate real state of all dharmas, in all their action and diversity, when no bias, no one-sided fabrication is added to them. Pushing quiescence further, taking it even more literally than it had previously been taken by its original advocates, is what makes it understood as the activity and diversity of all dharmas. In other words, not only "multiplicity" has become still, but "oneness" has also become still: stillness has been applied *universally*. This means it is not actually a question of subordinating the values or conceptions of a śrāvaka to some values other than those the śrāvaka currently holds. They are, instead, just pushed even further. For X to be "truly" X would seem to mean for X to be "Xish" not just partially, but to be Xish universally, in all directions, in all aspects, at all times. It means to be an arhat, to hold to precisely the stated values of śrāvakas, but more so.

This means that the śrāvaka did not really know what he meant when he called himself a śrāvaka. This too could be a dangerously condescending position—you don't know what you really are or mean; only I know—if it is not extended, again, *universally*. That means it must be applied to *me* as well. Just as you don't know what is really meant or implied in your own values, I don't know what is really meant or implied in my own values. It is not just that we don't know what reality is; it is that we don't even know what we *think* reality is. We are not aware of the meaning of our own thoughts. We do not know all of what we are thinking; we may think we are thinking about X but in fact be mistaken and actually be thinking about Y. We don't even know what the object we are currently making judgments about is or what those judgments might be. In other words, we may believe that we are deeming S to be P when this is not at all the activity we are engaged in. We are rather deeming S to be non-P. We may think we believe X but in fact be mistaken about this; our belief in X may be known by the Buddha to actually be a belief in Y. The very activity of deeming, of judging, is not a bare, transparent datum. It is not a brute fact that "I judge S to be P." Neither the thinker, the thought-of object, nor the thought itself has a decidable nature.

This means that my current conception of what I want—for example, to be a bodhisattva, to be a Buddha—cannot be entirely correct. There is more to being a bodhisattva or a Buddha than I now realize. The sūtra has already shown us some of what this is: being a bodhisattva and seeking to become a Buddha can include being a śrāvaka, seeking quiescence, rejecting the quest for Buddhahood. When this is revealed to me, my conception of Buddhahood—the condition to which I, as a self-proclaimed bodhisattva, have been aspiring—is modified. I now know more about what I've been worshipping and aspiring to; it also includes what I had excluded, and what excludes me, and indeed even the very exclusion of itself. It includes as well the knowledge that all particular conceptions of itself are incomplete, and my ignorance of what I really think about it serves as an invitation to have it revealed that apparent conflicting systems were upāyic revelations of itself. That is, I am told that I do not yet know all of what I am doing when I try to be a Buddha, and thus that, to my surprise, I have been working toward the perfect instantiation not only of "non-śrāvakahood" (bodhisattvahood) but also the perfect instantiation of "śrāvakahood." My beliefs, my actions, my desires are actually parts of the pursuit of "true śrāvakahood."

Another equivocation in the reading of the Chinese version of the sūtra further underscores this point. A line in the Sanskrit version of chapter 10 praises the *Lotus Sūtra* as follows: "It gives a final determination of the dharma of the śrāvakas, and thus [it—i.e., the *Lotus Sūtra*] is the king of all sūtras." However, the peculiarities of classical Chinese grammar are such that the ten Chinese characters used in the Kumārajīva version lend themselves to being read to mean: "It decisively completes the dharma of the śrāvakas, revealing it [i.e., the dharma of the śrāvakas] to be the king of all sūtras."[12] This is the way the line is understood in Tiantai exegesis, in which it forms a crucial statement of the sūtra's meaning, because the meaning of the line, if read in this way, is that the śrāvaka teaching—about quiescence, escaping from samsara, extinction of thought, eschewing Buddhahood—is really the ultimate goal of all Buddhism, the highest Buddhist teaching. We have already seen what this means: the bodhisattvas' apparent goal of Buddhahood turns out to be a full instantiation not only of their own consciously held values (knowledge of all modes, compassionate activity, etc.) but also precisely

of the consciously held values of the śrāvakas. A Buddha is one who has attained true śrāvakahood, true extinction, true quiescence.

Applying these points to the broader Buddhist/non-Buddhist case, and to the relations between conflicting beliefs in general, the picture is changed radically. First, it suggests that my ideal instantiates not only my ideal but also (the "real" version of) *your* ideal as you currently conceive it. The "real" version is just the more thoroughgoing version of it, applying it universally rather than selectively. In other words, you are not told to abandon your ideal; rather, you are told that your ideal is correct—more correct than you know. That means what I worship and value is actually, rightly considered, your own god—even the god defined, as in this case, precisely in contrast to mine. Further, applying the considerations rehearsed above, it is *because* your stated ideal excludes or contradicts mine that it is a part of what is realized in my ideal. This means that not only does your present belief and practice lead to my ideal but also the reverse: that my present belief and practice are leading to, are causes of, your ideal! I am a nascent form of your ideal as well, working toward it inadvertently through my current beliefs and practices. Arhats do not want to achieve "Buddha wisdom and action, knowledge of all modes," and yet they do, precisely by rejecting them. Bodhisattvas do not wish to achieve "quiescence," and yet they do, precisely by rejecting it.

In our musical metaphor, this means that I say to you first, "You are right, Johnny Rotten is *all that*. What really matters in life is nihilistic rebellion, energetic self-mutilation, atonal singing, and loud power chords. But actually, *true* nihilistic rebellion, energetic self-mutilation, atonality, and loud power chords are achieved only by Mozart. And you will become a Mozart. That is, you, who so love Johnny Rotten, will become a *true* Johnny Rotten. Your rejection of Mozart is how Mozart becomes Mozart—that is, the true Johnny Rotten. Moreover, I, in studying Mozart, am actually a nascent Johnny Rotten; my study of Mozart, my attempts to become like Mozart, my rejection of Johnny Rotten, will someday make me into a true Johnny Rotten. It is by more thoroughly and universally loving Johnny Rotten that you will become Mozart. And it is by more thoroughly and universally emulating Mozart that I will learn that to become Mozart means to fully instantiate the aesthetic of Johnny Rotten."

This can be extended not only to religions but also to the ideals embraced, consciously or unconsciously, by all sentient beings. Buddhahood is the "true" realization of all of these ideals, *and all of them reveal to us another dimension of what it is to be a Buddha*. This means not only do I teach you what the real meaning of your values are, but you have taught me something crucial about my own hero. Before seeing the śrāvakas, I would not have thought to characterize the Buddha who is constantly working to free sentient beings as "quiescent." When I meet the śrāvakas, I learn that this is another way I must grasp what Buddhahood is. Buddhahood is the "true" quiescence, true śrāvakahood. Extending this to other religions, we would have to say, "Buddhahood is not just rejection of Brahmanical rites, animal sacrifice, and ontological monism, as I thought: Buddhahood must be understood as the true *perfection* of Brahmanical rites, animal sacrifice, and monism." Seeing a Muslim, I must say not only, "You, by submitting to Allah, are actually learning to become a Buddha." I must also say, "You are learning to become a true embodiment of all the qualities of Allah, to truly be nothing apart from Allah." Once I have said that, I must further realize that I have changed the meaning of "Buddha" to that of my own ideal. It turns out that one of the attributes of Buddhahood is "true sovereignty" (assuming Allah denotes sovereignty), "absolute uniqueness" (assuming Allah denotes uniqueness), or "true creativity" (assuming Allah denotes creator). I hadn't known that before mixing with monotheists.

Meeting a Christian, I say, "Being a Christian is a part of bodhisattva practice. It is a cause of Buddhahood; keep doing it." Then I say, "To be a Buddha would be to be a true Christ." Then I say, "Now I know more about Buddha—it also means to be an anointed one in the fullest sense, a redeemer of sin, to be crucified and rise again," and so on and so forth. From the Jew I learn that Buddhahood is a true form of commandment keeping, historicity, chosenness, mission, marginality, or what have you —*however* the ideal of Judaism might be conceived in an individual case. To take up the vexed case alluded to above, a Christian applying the *Lotus* teaching on this point to a Jew would not say, "Only Jews who convert to Christianity are true Jews," but, "we Christians are actually going to become not only obedient to Christ, but Christs. Further, you Jews are young versions of Christians, hence you are also young Christs. But

crucially, you will mature into being Christs only by being Jews—keeping to the old law and rejecting the 'messiahship' of Christ—more thoroughly than you are doing it now. Rejecting Christ more thoroughly is the only practice that will lead you to become Christs! And this reveals to us Christians that to be a Christ is to be thoroughly Jewish in just this sense: to reject Christ and hold to the old law universally, to apply the fidelity to the old commandments and history in all things, to reject (for example) any and every historical individual as the messiah (or whatever). That is what we too must do to finally become Christs, sons of God, ourselves." The impossible "Lotusified" Muslim would say to the Christian, "You become truly none other than Allah, the only true agent of all activity, which is true thorough submission to Allah, the true faith of a Muslim, by being more thoroughly Christian, pushing your belief that God has a son and that son is this particular person and none other, even further. And I will become a true Muslim when I see that this means also becoming not just the one who submits to Allah, but Allah himself, and that this will entail the belief in God having a son who is just this one particular person and none other, and rejecting the messenger Mohammed."

What is at stake here, among other things, is the apparently unbridgeable gap between the monotheist insistence on an eternal separation between God and creatures and the Buddhist commitment to immanence and the non-separation of all sentient beings from Buddhahood, the insistence not only that all sentient beings without exception somehow relate to or participate in the absolute being but also that each is itself the fullest and highest embodiment of that being. From the point of view developed here, we need not commit to those few exceptional monotheists who manage, through theological subtlety, to interpret monotheism as in the last analysis entailing some sort of total immanence of creatures; for example, the Sufis claim that there is no agent but Allah (*Wahdat al-Wujud*). Rather, this gap is bridged by seeing that "separation" is always also a form of "non-separation" and that "non-separation" is always a form of "separation." Each always entails the other, whether in thought or in reality, whether in this world or any other world. Indeed, as we shall see in the full Tiantai exposition of these ideas in the coming chapters, the deeper the realization of separation,

the more it manifests the co-presence of non-separation, and vice versa. The eternal unbridgeable transcendence of God, the ontological separation between God and creatures, is itself another way of saying the full mutual immanence of all sentient beings and all Buddhas, of being and Emptiness, of the absolute and the contingent, and the fact that every sentient being down to the smallest worm is itself the Buddha, the whole Buddha, and nothing but the Buddha, and thereby interpenetrative with all other beings, is itself the eternal separation of creatures from God and of all creatures from each other.

Interfaith dialogue would then become an exploration of how and in what sense these claims can be made sense of. It becomes irrelevant to decide (1) whether holders of other beliefs should be converted; (2) whether they should be respected or allowed to continue their activities; (3) whether any common ground can be found between us and them; and (4) whether they are expressing our own beliefs in an exotic or indirect form. The ideal of the *Lotus Sūtra*, Buddhahood, is the point of convergence and intersubsumption of all particular values, beliefs, and practices, including those of separation and transcendence and otherness itself. What appear to be conflicting values reveal themselves to be further attributes of one another—to intersubsume—when each particular value is pushed to its extreme, made to hold thoroughly and universally to its own convictions, thought through to the end. They intersubsume one another when they are subjected to *universalizing puns*. The work to which we should now devote ourselves is to discover what kind of universalizing pun of the other's values reveals new dimensions of our own values. To meet someone with other beliefs is to meet our own unseen side, the repressed half of ourselves. Experience of otherness and even conflict is an encounter with our own unrecognized double meanings.

I said above that there is no exact equivalent in human experience for the "certainty of outcome" entailed in the "certain assurance of Buddhahood" position, which sees sentient beings as nascent Buddhas. As a substitute, I suggested the repeatedly viewed biopic or the science fiction time-travel scenario. But actually we do have one experience of this kind of certainty in advance of outcome, and it is something that happens to every person every day. It is called *memory*. When we recall a past event,

we are reviewing it from a position that already knows what happens afterward. If you decide to go through your first date with someone you later fall in love with, going step-by-step in your mind through that day, you are in fact having an experience and an experience "of" precisely the same events. But you are experiencing it differently. You are experiencing it with a knowledge of how it would turn out. This makes everything about it look very different. All the things that seemed uncertain are now seen as nascent forms of future joys or sorrows, future triumphs or failures. All the things that seemed irrelevant are now seen as nascent forms of things that would come to evoke the deepest responses from within ourselves, would shake us to our marrow, would change how we see ourselves.

We experience ourselves in this past as having not known where all of this was heading, what all of these things meant. We see our own ignorance while also suffused with our present knowledge that this person, who seemed to be just some woman in a bar, is in fact the early version of your wife, the mother of your child, the love of your life, and so on, with all her attitudes and actions parts of the causes that made her so. As we took each other's measure, quarreled, resisted, we were actually in the process of falling in love, as we can see now in retrospect. And those things about her that you hated or rejected at the time, you look back now knowing that they would later come to have deep resonances in you, teach you more about yourself, reveal to you what you were overlooking in your own conception of your deepest aspirations. You resisted in her those aspects of yourself that you were not yet ready to acknowledge but that you later learned turn out to be profoundly related to you, the weirdly conflicted and suppressed aspects of yourself that had been resisted as incapable of integration, alienated aspects of yourself that had previously been experienced as threatening to yourself, aspects of the world that would in fact thereby fulfill your own (previously misconceived) desires—even if, to take the cynical worst-case scenario, in the twisted form of providing you with the ideal torture device, the claws to fit precisely your wounds, the hair shirt that fits you so well that something in you just had to have it.

The teaching of the *Lotus Sūtra* is that we are to experience our present lives as past-life memories of a Buddha. This would mean to experi-

ence the present as the remembered past. My present is the Buddha remembering his past. Our present life is the Buddha's past life in the peculiar form of *experiencing a memory*. My present uncertainty about where I'm going, what I'm doing, what I think—as well as about where you're going, what you're doing, what you think—are the Buddha remembering what it was like when he didn't yet know that these two were going to turn out to reveal so much about each other, that each was the unseen other side of the other. To worship this Buddha is to anticipate his retrospection upon us as his former selves. Try to imagine it this way: your experience of your life right now, your experience in the present, is also the Buddha thinking back over his past life. You are a past-life memory of the Buddha.

EIGHT

TIANTAI

The Multiverse as You

FROM EMPTINESS TO THE THREE TRUTHS

Question: If you add the idea of Emptiness and the Two Truths theory (chapters 2 and 3 of this book) to the Buddha-nature and Original Enlightenment (chapter 4) and run that through the notion of the interfusion of different points of views in the "new Middle Ways" presenting the non-duality of desire and desirelessness, time and timelessness, good and evil, enlightenment and delusion suggested by the *Lotus Sūtra* (chapters 5, 6, and 7), what do you get?

Answer: Tiantai Buddhism.

A very greatly oversimplified restatement of the Tiantai view of the relation of conscious beings to the world they live in can be put like this: every event, function, or characteristic occurring in experience is the action of all sentient and insentient beings working together. Every instant of experience is the whole of existential reality, manifesting in this particular form, as this particular entity or experience. But this "whole" is irreducibly multiple and irreducibly unified at once in the following way: all possible conflicting, contrasted, and axiologically varied aspects are irrevocably present—in the sense of "findable"—in each of these totality effects. Good and evil, delusion and enlightenment, Buddhahood and deviltry, are all "inherently entailed" in each and every event. More important, however, these multiple entities are not "simply located" even virtually or conceptually; the "whole" that is the agent performing every experience is not a collection of these various "inherently entailed" entities or qualities arrayed side by side like pebbles in a bag. Rather,

they are "intersubsumptive." That is, any one of them subsumes all the others. Each part is the whole, each quality subsumes all other qualities, and yet none are ever eradicable. A Buddha in the world makes the world all Buddha, saturated in every locus with the quality "Buddhahood"; a devil in the world makes the world all devil, permeated with "deviltry." Both Buddha and devil are always in the world. So the world is always both *entirely* Buddhahood and *entirely* deviltry. Every moment of experience is always completely delusion, evil, and pain, through and through, and also completely enlightenment, goodness, and joy, through and through.

Tiantai takes the non-dualistic ideas suggested by the *Lotus Sūtra* in fables and unexplained narrative hints and adapts the resources of Emptiness and the Two Truths to give them a full philosophical explanation and practical application for Buddhist practice. The *Lotus Sūtra* had made upāya ("skillful means") the centerpiece of Buddhism and asserted a unity of all practices in the One Vehicle, all leading toward Buddhahood. Tiantai follows this lead and constructs a vast and complex system to be used in accounting for and integrating all known forms of Buddhist and even non-Buddhist practice, all of which are acceptable skillful means that are appropriate and wholesome for different persons and times. It rejects nothing, but it organizes all known teachings and practices into an interconnected system. The system has an interesting double structure: the first time through it appears to be hierarchical, putting the Mahāyāna above the Hīnayāna and the *Lotus* above the rest of the Mahāyāna. But the idea of redefinition of identity through recontextualization is applied here, and when the hierarchical crown of the *Lotus* has done its work, it has the retroactive effect of making all the other parts equal as aspects of the One Vehicle, as we have seen in thinking through the implications of the *Lotus Sūtra* in the past two chapters of the present text. That is, no teaching, practice, or behavior has only a single meaning; its meaning is determined by the context in which it is viewed. So any given doctrine or practice can be seen as both the ultimate truth and as a more partial and only locally relevant, or lesser, truth. The Tiantai system of integrating all the various teachings and ideas and perspectives in the world provides a system for seeing everything twice, three times, infinite times, reassessing and developing the meanings of each item as

it comes into broader and broader relations. The Hīnayāna teaching is, in the narrower context, a "lesser" truth. But in the context of the One Vehicle, it is itself an instantiation of the One Vehicle, and even gives unique expression to it. The same goes for all other particular ideas, beliefs, and practices. Since nothing has only one meaning, everything can mean anything. The Tiantai "classification of teachings" is an intricate and complex way of spelling out in what context and in what way each doctrine means each of the many things it means.[1]

How does Tiantai Buddhist doctrine arrive at this conclusion, and what are its human implications? The Tiantai theory rests on two intimately related foundations: the doctrine of the Three Truths and the doctrine of "opening the provisional to reveal the real." The heart of the matter, the most fundamental and far-reaching renovation of Buddhism accomplished by the Tiantai school, is the move from the *Two Truths* model to a *Three Truths* one. The Two Truths are conventional and ultimate truth. The Three Truths are conventional truth, ultimate truth, and *the Center*. The Center is the non-duality between conventional and ultimate truth, their intersubsumption, their synonymity. The Center means that conventional truth is also ultimate truth, that ultimate truth is also conventional truth—that the very distinction between them is itself only conventional, and yet, since by this very move the conventional is not merely conventional but is also ultimate, this very distinction is itself also therefore ultimate. Tiantai regards this move as simply the thinking through of the Two Truths to their logical conclusion. Let us try to understand its derivation and its implications.

In the discussion of the Two Truths earlier in this book (chapter 2), we saw that according to the original version of this idea as it was developed by the Indian Buddhist philosophers, any specific thing we could say about the world was at best a "conventional truth," which served as a kind of raft to get beyond it to the "ultimate truth" of Emptiness—Emptiness not as a view or theory or concept, but as an ineffable experience of the liberation from all views, all conceptions of "things," and hence from all suffering. All views about how or what things are were to be transcended and left behind. Recall also that some ideas did not count even as conventional truths—for example, (1) metaphysical and religious theories about the Absolute, or about the world as a whole, and

(2) nonconventional views of things in the world. There is a kind of hierarchy in the Indian Two Truths theory. First there is plain falsehood, including all philosophical theories about reality. Then there is conventional truth, which includes ordinary daily life ideas about self and other, cause and effect, and so on, and also Buddhist ideas about suffering, the Four Noble Truths, nonself, and even "Emptiness" considered as a concept. These ideas lead beyond themselves, instrumentally, to the experience of Emptiness, which is liberation from all views. The conventional truths had an instrumental value, but none were really "true" about things—Emptiness meant that any way of experiencing the world was always, in the most ultimate sense, false. Also, there are really only one or two kinds of conventional truth: first, commonsense daily speech, the correct general names for things as used in the daily life of your particular community, and second, Buddhist ideas. The reason all of these count as "truths" is because they are useful in leading us to liberation from suffering and in leading us to liberation from these ideas themselves. They have the power to lead us beyond themselves.

In the Tiantai Three Truths theory, in contrast, instead of concluding that every particular view and thing is false, we conclude that all is ultimately true. Every possible view is equally a truth. There is no longer a hierarchy between the levels and no category of plain falsehood. Remember how in the story of the "lost son" from chapter 4 of the *Lotus Sūtra* the "skillful means" (the father's estate) was not just what gets the son to the realization of enlightenment but also what he actually received when he got there. In the same way, "conventional truth" in Tiantai is not something to be left behind when we reach enlightenment, but rather what is obtained and mastered there. Moreover, nothing is left out of it—all possible statements, viewpoints, ideas, concepts, and positions are conventional truths. The criterion is still the same: all things can be used as skillful means to lead to Buddhahood, just as even śrāvakahood and the behavior of Devadatta, the extreme rejection of the Buddha, were causes and antecedents to the attainment of Buddhahood. So now we have Three Truths, which are not a raft-like instrument to get beyond all statements and concepts, and a final higher truth that allows us to have no biased and particular view of things, but rather as three true ways of viewing any particular thing.

However you may be viewing a particular part of the world or the world as a whole, it is "conventionally" true. There are not just a few conventional truths, but an infinite number of them, even when they are directly opposed and contradictory. So in Two Truths theory we would say that "This is a cup" is conventionally true, and "This cup is empty" is a higher conventional truth, which finally leads us to a direct, inconceivable experience of the emptiness of this cup and the liberation from all suffering. If I were to point to this "cup" and say, "This is an elephant," however, that would not even be a conventional truth, because that is not how most people think of the object. That would be a plain error. And if I said, "This is an expression of the will of God," that would also be an error, not even a conventional truth, since it tried to make a claim beyond that of conventional usage to an ultimate, universally applicable, absolute truth. But in Tiantai Three Truths theory it is just as true to say, "This is an elephant" as to say, "This is a cup." And neither of these is less true than saying, "This is empty," or indeed any less true than "experiencing" the emptiness of this cup/elephant.

In both cases what I have is a *locally coherent* way of viewing this thing—it just means that it *looks that way* from some perspective, within some set of parameters, for some length of time. It doesn't matter anymore whether those parameters are shared by the common sense of a particular community or speech group; all that matters is that it is possible to make it look that way, that it looks that way from anywhere, for even one moment. In Two Truths and Emptiness theory, nothing is really true. In Tiantai Three Truths theory, *everything* is true. We don't need an extra "Emptiness" outside of this locally coherent way of seeing things; Emptiness just means that whatever is *locally* coherent is also *globally in*coherent. That is, when all factors are taken into consideration, the original way a thing appears is no longer unambiguously present.

To understand this, consider table 8.1. When we look at the round figure together with only *one* context, it has a clear identity: it is the number zero. But when we add another context at the same time, the figure becomes ambiguous: it can now be read as either a zero or the letter O. As we keep adding more contexts, its identity becomes more and more ambiguous. And when we consider all things in the universe at the same time, the initial identities we have assigned to them are supplemented

by more and more ambiguity. Looking at just the single series of numbers, it is a zero: this is local coherence. When I see this cup simply as a cup, I am doing the same thing: ignoring a lot of other factors, contexts, points of view, ways of viewing, and narrowing down the relevant factors to allow it to appear as a single unambiguous something: a cup. If I consider the molecules of which it is made, or the energy it expresses, or the uses to which it might be put in the context of various narratives, or its deep past and deep future, its "cupness" becomes ambiguous; it is simultaneously lots of other things, part of many different stories. It is a blip on the screen of energy transformations, or a murder weapon, or an art object, or a doorstop. The same is true of yourself and your actions right now. They are unambiguous only to the extent that we narrow our vision around them.

This is the meaning of "Emptiness" in Tiantai: ontological ambiguity. The term "ambiguity" usually refers only to how we see things. We assume that, in themselves, everything simply is what it is. But we may have an unclear view of it; we can't yet tell if it's this or that. We assume that, at least in principle, it must be one or the other. The idea of Emptiness is the idea that this is true "ontologically"—that is, it pertains to the very being of things. To say they are empty does not mean they are a blank, for that would be a definite something. It means that they are, in themselves, *ambiguous*. Put another way, everything is *more* than it seems to be, or than it *can* seem to be, no matter what angle it is seen from, no matter how thoroughly it is known, no matter how comprehensive a sum of information is gathered about it. It has the character of being a "something" (a cup, a chair, an elephant), with a number of specifiable characteristics, but every "something," just to be there as something, has the additional characteristic of "more-to-it-ivity"—of always overflowing whatever is determined about it, of being *more* than what can be seen from any angle.

This "more," however, does not leave the original "known" part unchanged; rather, it recontextualizes it. We are always seeing the tip of an iceberg. But even the "tip" is no longer what we thought it was before we knew it was a tip of something more. Imagine that you come upon what looks like a white marble lying on the ground. You experience it as round, small, and white, and immediately you construct a lived attitude toward the marble: it is something that can be picked up, rolled, played

TABLE 8.1. ONTOLOGICAL AMBIGUITY AS A FUNCTION OF CONTEXT

What is the following figure?

O

Answer here: _____

What is the same figure in the diagram below?

-2 -1 O 1 2

Answer here: _____

What is it now?

M
N
-2 -1 O 1 2
P
Q

How about now?

O
M
N
-2 -1 O 1 2 O
P
Q

with, pocketed. But then you go to pick it up and find that it is stuck to the ground. You cannot lift it. You try to dig it out and find that it extends downward farther than you can dig; it is the tip of a larger item, which appears to be a long rod or cylindrical pipe of some kind. But as you dig deeper, you find that after about five inches of narrow thinness it starts to expand outward; it is a spire on top of a cone. This cone expands outward as you keep digging down. When you get about twenty feet down, the cone ends, embedded in a soft, scaly material. Then the earth rumbles and an enormous two-horned monster emerges from underground; it is five hundred feet tall, and each of its horns is twenty feet high with a long, sharp tip. You have been digging out one of the horns. What you had seen as a marble on the ground was actually the very tip of one of the horns. Now look again at that tip. You had experienced it as round. But it turns out it is not round at all; it is sharp. Yet it has not changed at all; you are still seeing what you saw. It is not white either; the tip looked white against the ground, but now, looking at the monster's horn as a whole,

you see it as a pattern of mostly green spots interspersed here and there with white; viewed as a whole, the horn, including its tip, looks green. Nor is it movable, pocketable, play-withable—it is rather dangerous, razor sharp, to be avoided. And yet nothing of what you saw was taken away; it was just supplemented with further information, with its larger context.

Tiantai views all things this way. To see something is to see "not-all" of it. We are always seeing a little fragment of the world, but every bit of the world is changed by the fact that it is a part of the world, is recontextualized by the rest of the world, by the rest of space and the rest of time. In fact, if we ever saw all, we would see nothing. For to see, to take something as "there," as "real," is to place it within a context, to contrast it to something outside of itself, something that is not it. To see all is to see nothing. If I were to say that the entire universe is "round," this would make no sense. This round would not be round, for round requires a non-round *outside it* to be round. It would have to be bordered by something to shape it into roundness, but the universe would also include that outside-the-roundness part. If I were to say the entire universe is sharp, this would also make no sense. This sharp would not be sharp; for sharp requires a non-sharp *outside it* to be sharp. To say the whole universe is sharp, then, means no more and no less than saying the whole universe is round. We can make no specific determinations about the whole, about the entire universe, for that outside of which nothing exists, because all particular specifications require a contrast to something outside of them. Everything we can say or think comes from the realm of the finite and cannot be applied to the infinite. But the Tiantai point is that we cannot speak of anything finite without also involving some determination of the whole, of the infinite. If I were to say, "This thing is sharp," I would have to be assuming that "The whole universe is such that this thing is sharp." I cannot say that. The whole universe cannot be "such that this marble is sharp" any more than the whole universe can be "sharp." But this also means I cannot say the whole universe is "such that this marble is not-sharp." Either is equally legitimate; either is equally illegitimate. What I can say, then, is that "this marble appears to be round, but round is such that it is always turning out also to be more than round, to be non-round, and vice versa. Roundness is more-to-it-ive. Round and non-round intersubsume each other."

We may better understand the Tiantai position by retranslating the terms "conventional truth" and "ultimate truth" as "local coherence" and "global incoherence," respectively. Conventional truth is the apprehension of some entity X as having a certain discernible, coherent identity. Ultimate truth, traditionally the experience of Emptiness, is the revelation that this coherent identity is only provisionally coherent, that it fails to be coherent in all contexts and from all points of view, and thus is globally incoherent. X is analyzable exhaustibly into non-X elements, non-X causes, non-X antecedents, non-X contexts, which are revealed to be not external to X, but constitutive of it. No X is discoverable apart from the non-X elements, causes, antecedents, and contexts that are present here, we may say, "as" X. This "as" may be taken as a shorthand way of indicating what is meant by the "third truth"—centrality, the relation of sameness as contrast between this object's identity as X and the effacing of that identity. When I say, "I am using this book *as* a doorstop," I mean that this entity has two different identities at once: it is genuinely being a book, and it is genuinely being a doorstop. So it is for X and non-X. These non-X elements that are present here as X are revealed simply by closer attention to X itself; they are not brought in from outside. X appears exclusively as X only when our field of attention is arbitrarily narrowed to exclude some of the relevant ways it can be considered. Attention to its constitutive elements, antecedents, and contexts reveals that this very same item, X, is also readable as non-X. Hence the two seemingly opposite positions of the Two Truths turn out to be two alternate ways of saying the same thing: (1) to be identifiable is to be coherent, (2) to be coherent is to be locally coherent, and (3) to be locally coherent is to be globally incoherent. With this move, the third category from the Two Truths theory, "plain error," drops out of the picture: all coherences, even alternate metaphysical claims, are in the same boat, all are identities that are locally coherent/globally incoherent. The truth of a statement consists simply in its coherence to some given perspective, which is always the effect of arbitrarily limiting the horizons of relevance. When all considerations are brought in at once, X has no single consistent noncontradictory identity.

There was always a problem in Emptiness theory: Emptiness was supposed to be not a "view" at all, to predicate nothing about reality. But

if it does anything at all, if it negates or excludes any other view, it is, in the Tiantai view, still a kind of view, because to be something in particular is just to exclude something else in particular. That is all a "thing" is; that is all a "view" is. Emptiness theory gets into an infinite regress, chasing its tail around the problem of the transcendence of Emptiness; no statement can represent it, even "all things are empty." It is purely and totally above and beyond anything that can be thought or said, all ordinary experience of identities in the world. It is a negation that is supposed to bear no relation at all to what it negates, to entirely escape the system of relations, of conditionality. Emptiness is supposed to be strictly "inconceivable." In Tiantai this problem disappears. Emptiness is still very important, but it is simply a *conditional* assertion of unconditionality. We do not have all the conditionality (specifiability, particularity) on one side and all the unconditionality (transcendence, inconceivability) on the other. Everything, every experience, every identity, every action, is in the same ambiguous situation: they are all *both conditional and unconditional, both conceivable and inconceivable*. The thought, experience, concept "Emptiness" is also both conditional and unconditional, both conceivable and inconceivable. It is locally coherent (conditional, conceivable) but globally incoherent (unconditional, inconceivable). It appears in experience as something in particular (locally coherent as precisely Emptiness), but this, like every other local coherence, is haunted by its own more-to-it-ivity: there is more to it than the concept "Emptiness" can hold. Emptiness is, to coin a word, "more-to-it-ivity," and more-to-it-ivity is itself more-to-it-ive. It appears not just as more-to-it-ivity but as specific identities: marble, horn, round, sharp, something more, above and beyond, simple more-to-it-ivity as such. Ambiguity is itself ambiguous: the roundness is not just round; it is ambiguous. But the ambiguity is not just ambiguity; it is also round. This applies to everything else as well. Local coherence and global coherence are just two ways of saying the same thing.

The fact that conventional and ultimate truths are synonymous is what is meant by the Center. This is also taken to mean that this coherence, X, is the center of all other coherences in the distinctively Chinese sense of being their source, value, meaning, end, ground, around which they all converge, into which they are all subsumed. "Center" (*zhong*)

indicates the midpoint between extremes, the point of indifference that is neither of the two opposites but also equally participates in each of the two, the point of non-duality between opposites. It is unbiasedness, non-tiltingness, the convergence of negation and affirmation of any possible proposition or entity. In this sense it denotes the inclusiveness of all opposites as well as the subsuming field that unifies them all. It is thus the ground of the being of all the entities it subsumes, the center of gravity that brings them into the relationships with each other that determines their identities. It is the determining "disambiguater" that fits all other things around it together in a particular way, the orienting center around which they orbit, thus giving them their specific character and function.

The Chinese character *zhong* (中) also denotes "what is within, from the inside" and also "to hit the mark, to match"—what is truly and exactly the reality of each entity. So to say that each entity is at once provisionally posited, empty, and the Center is to say that each entity is at once locally coherent, globally incoherent, and the determining center of all other local coherences, which participates in all of them, encompasses and includes them all, and grounds their specific functions and characteristics. Any X subsumes all the non-X characteristics that are appearing here as X: they are instantiations of X, which serves as their subsuming category, their essence, their meaning, their ground, their destiny. X is the overall style of being that is expressed by its various aspects, which is now seen to include all non-X elements without exception. Each entity not only is ambiguated by the presence of all other entities but also, by the same token, disambiguates these other entities in terms of itself.[2] Because they are all in the position of being the subsumer, they are all in the position of being subsumed as well. To be X is to be locally coherent (X), globally incoherent (non-X), and intersubsumptive as-ness (X expressing itself in the form of all non-X's, and all non-X's expressing themselves in the form of X).

The second pillar of Tiantai doctrine is the concept of "opening the provisional to reveal the real" (*kaiquan xianshi* 開權顯實). This is a way of further specifying the relation between local coherence and global incoherence, which are not only synonymous but also irrevocably opposed and indeed identical only by means of their opposition. Provisional truth is the antecedent, the premise, and indeed in a distinctive sense the *cause*

of ultimate truth, but only because it is the strict exclusion of ultimate truth. It is here that we see the exact meaning of the "non-duality" of opposites denoted by the Center: not oneness, not difference, but a unique way of being simultaneously one and different. How?

We can start to understand this intuitively by means of a model derived from the structure of a very common but often overlooked experience: the contrastive relation between the setup and the punch line of *a joke*. Consider the following:

> (Setup) Two strangers were chatting in a veterinarian's waiting room. One told the other he was there to pick up his dog. "They're doing some tests on him," he said. "He's an odd biological anomaly. He was born with no nose."
>
> "Really?" said the other. "How does he smell?"
>
> (Punch line) "Awful."

Let's talk about that structure. When we hear the question "How does he smell?" it seems as if it is a serious query, an expression of serious curiosity about canine olfactory anatomy and its mutations. It has the qualities of seriousness, of factuality, of non-ironic information. There is nothing funny about that statement. But when the punch line comes, retrospectively, that setup is funny. That setup is funny because it has been recontextualized by the pun on the word "smell," which is made to have more than one identity when put into a new context.

The key point here, deriving from the specific Tiantai understanding of the *Lotus Sūtra*, is that it is precisely by *not* being funny that the setup was funny. In other words, if it was already funny, if you didn't take it seriously for a second, the contrast between the two different meanings of "smell" could never have clashed in the way that is necessary to make the laughter, to make it actually funny. We have a setup that is serious and a punch line that is funny, but when you look back at the setup from the vantage point of having heard the punch line, that setup is also funny. After all, we don't say that just the punch line is funny; we say the whole joke is funny. The setup is funny in the mode of not being funny yet; it is only funny because it wasn't funny.

It is the same thing in the *Lotus Sūtra*, and it is the same thing in life. You're enlightened! That is what Mahāyāna Buddhism says, "Everyone is enlightened! Everybody is a Buddha!" But the way you are a Bud-

dha is the way the setup of a joke is funny—by *not* being a Buddha. By struggling toward Buddhahood, toward something else, but by revisualizing, recontextualizing, or expanding awareness, which has been the preferred technique in Buddhism all along, those very things that are the details of daily life, of the struggles to interact, to deal with conditions and suffering and lack of control, are not just a means to Buddhahood. They are themselves Buddhahood as the life of a sentient being.

The "provisional," conventional truth, local coherence, is the setup. The "ultimate truth," Emptiness, global incoherence, ontological ambiguity, is the punch line. What is important here is to preserve both the contrast between the two and their ultimate identity in sharing the quality of humorousness that belongs to every atom of the joke considered as a whole, once the punch line has been revealed. The setup is serious, while the punch line is funny. The funniness of the punch line depends on the seriousness of the setup and on the contrast and difference between the two. However, once the punch line has occurred, it is also the case that the setup is, retrospectively, funny. This also means that the original contrast between the two is both preserved and annulled: neither funniness nor seriousness means the same thing after the punch line dawns, for their original meanings depended on the mutually exclusive nature of their defining contrast. Is the setup serious or funny? It is both: it is funny *as* serious and serious *as* funny. Is the punch line serious or funny? It is both, but in an interestingly different way. It is obviously funny, but is it also serious? Yes. Why? Because now that the setup has occurred, both "funny" and "serious" have a different meaning. Originally we thought that "funny" meant "what I laugh at when I hear it" or something like that, and "serious" meant "what gives me non-funny information" or something similar. But now we see that "funny" can also mean "what I take to be serious, what I am *not* laughing about, what I am earnestly considering, or crying over, or bewailing even." But this means also that "serious" means "what can turn out to be either funny or serious." So both "funny" and "serious" now both mean "funny-and-serious, what can appear as both funny and serious." Each is now a Center that subsumes the other; they are intersubsumptive. As a consequence, the old pragmatic standard of truth is applied more liberally here: all claims, statements, and positions are true in the sense that

all *can*, if properly recontextualized, lead to liberation—which is to say, to their own self-overcoming. Conversely, none will lead to liberation if not properly contextualized.

We can restate the above somewhat more formulaically as follows:

1. Every phenomenal object is a coherence. That is, it is a joining (cohering) of disparate elements—either (a) the factors that comprise it, its internal parts; or (b) its temporal causal antecedents; or (c) its contrasting conceptual contexts (i.e., its qualitative contrast to whatever it is "not," which is regarded as essential to its determination as this particular entity). Context and content are in the same boat in this view, in that for this object to appear phenomenally—to be "coherent" or legible, discernible—requires the coming together of multiple factors: figure and ground, elements in a structure, causal conditions. What is crucial here is that these factors are heterogeneous and that they phenomenally differ in some discernible way from the object they come to constitute.

2. Every coherence is a local coherence; it remains coherent as this or that only within a limited horizon of relevance. That is, its legibility depends on the fixing of a certain scale, frame, or focal orientation; its identity as this precise thing depends phenomenally on restricting how it is viewed or the number of other factors that are viewed in tandem with it.

3. Every local coherence is globally incoherent. When all contexts are taken into account at once, and all applications and aspects are brought to bear, the original coherence vanishes into ambiguity.

4. Every globally incoherent local coherence subsumes all other local coherences; the ambiguity that is left when the original content has become incoherent is not a blank, but something equally readable as any other possible content.

5. Every subsuming is an intersubsumption. When X is readable as Y, Y is also readable as X. Each entity is readable as every other entity, as part of every other entity, and as the whole that subsumes all other entities as its parts. Each entity is identifiable, ontologically ambiguous, and all-pervaded as all-pervading.

The Three Truths, then, are actually three different ways of looking at any object or state. Each implies the other two, and each is one way to describe the whole of that object, including its other two aspects.

This cup is *a cup*: that is provisional truth, conventional truth, local coherence. This cup is *not a cup*: that is ultimate truth, its Emptiness, its global incoherence. To be a cup is to not be a cup: that is its centrality, its non-duality, its absoluteness. To be a cup is to be any other locally coherent thing or state: a non-cup, an elephant, a superhighway, a chair, perfect enlightenment; that is the further implication of centrality, the intersubsumption of all coherences, the presence of all in and as each. This cup is all things, all possible ways of being, all universes, *as* this cup. Conversely, the cup pervades all other entities, is discoverable everywhere. You are the entire world and all states of all things seen from all possible angles *as* you. And wherever there is an entity, you-ness is also present to be read there too.

The Three Truths are thus three alternate but mutually implicative ways of looking at all things. But, crucially, this distinctive mutually implicit relationship among them produces important consequences that are not shared by Two Truths views. In Mahāyāna Buddhist Emptiness theory, it had always been common to assert that "form is no different from Emptiness, Emptiness is no different from form; precisely form is Emptiness, precisely Emptiness is form," in the well-known formula of the *Heart Sūtra*, a concise compendium of the Prajñāpāramitā literature. This is sometimes taken to mean merely that all things, taken in toto, are precisely Emptiness, that Emptiness is not a transcendent principle or underlying substratum, but, here too, merely an alternate way of looking at all things. Emptiness is like the water, all things are like the waves, so that really they are just two names for the same thing, considered as a whole. The Emptiness "of" all things is not anywhere apart from where the things themselves are. All things and the Emptiness of all things are coextensive. Similarly, for particular things, the Emptiness of this cup is coextensive with this cup. Wherever the cup is, there is the Emptiness of the cup. The Emptiness of the cup is not something other than the cup.

But note that structurally this Two Truths view is no different from what one could say about a metaphysical substance of any kind or of any omnipresent substrate: "All cookies are precisely dough, dough is precisely the cookies, cookies are not different from dough, dough is not different from cookies." "All things are matter, matter is things, things

are not different from matter, matter is not different from things." The claim here is that "matter" is coextensive with "all things," they are really not two different entities. The matter of the cup is coextensive with the cup. "Matter" is just a different way of looking at "all things." We could also say, "All things are energy"—energy is coextensive with all things, not something other than all things, and vice versa. Structurally, this is no different from saying, "All things are expressions of God's will, God's will is expressed in all things; the way things are is not different from what God wills." The claim here is that "the way things are" and "what God wills" are coextensive, are just two ways of looking at the same totality. In the structural sense, all of these claims are isomorphic with the "form is Emptiness" claim, understood in the above-mentioned way. But this is far from the Tiantai view.

The expanded Emptiness notion embodied in the Tiantai Three Truths is after something much more extreme. We sometimes find it expressed in another formula from the Prajñāpāramitā literature, but applied with a more jarring kind of specificity, as, for example, in an early meditation text where Zhiyi casually asserts that for the bodhisattva contemplating his own breathing, "there is no single breath apart from emptiness, *and no emptiness exists apart from this particular breath*."[3] For Zhiyi's statement is not about "*all* matter" or "*all* phenomena," but about one very specific phenomenon: the breath, this specific inhalation and exhalation going on right here and now. This would be like saying there is no Emptiness apart from this cup in front of me. To say, "There is no Emptiness apart from this cup" is very different from "There is no Emptiness apart from matter" or even "The Emptiness of the cup is nowhere apart from the cup itself." Rather, it is like "There is no dough anywhere apart from this particular cookie" or "There is no matter anywhere apart from this particular cup." That requires something structurally very unlike "dough" or "matter" to be what is being referred to.

And it is: Emptiness. "Emptiness" does not behave like "cookie dough" or "matter" or "energy" or "God's will" when adduced as the name of what all things are coextensive with, are identical to, because Emptiness is just literally dependent co-arising. Constitutive fragility. Constitutive impermanence. Constitutive conditionality. Lack of independent identity. Constitutive context-dependence. Constituent inter-

action, constitutive relationship: to be is to be interacting. This means, in sum, *constitutive openness to alterity*.

But openness to alterity, if it is constitutive—that is, intrinsic to the constitution of any presence of any kind—is necessarily illimitable. For if there were a limit to openness to alterity, if some level could be reached where a being was closed off to further influence or interaction, that (whether it was the whole of existence or a specifiable absolute ground of existence) would be a substance, non-conditional, which is what is excluded by the stipulation of openness to otherness. Hence we have "illimitable openness to otherness" as a synonym for "existing." But to be open to otherness is to be, to that exact extent, ambiguous.

In a word, then, "Emptiness means" *illimitable ambiguity*. That is the real meaning of "Emptiness" in Tiantai Buddhism. The meaning now becomes clearer: "Apart from illimitable ambiguity there is no cup; apart from this cup there is no illimitable ambiguity anywhere." How shall we understand this?

First, we have the simple sense in which illimitable ambiguity as causal susceptibility to otherness—non-substantiality—is necessary for the very production of the cup: if things were not empty, they could not occur, they could not be determined, they could not exist. This is because everything would be static, no causality could occur, nothing could become; and if nothing could become, nothing could be. If you take away a thing's involvement in causes and conditions, you take away the thing. Put another way, whatever exists is only what it is because it has become that way, and moreover, it is only existing and is only what it is because it is a temporal process. If you take away the thing's duration, you take away the thing. That is, if you take away the impermanence, you take away the thing. An eternal rose is not a rose.

The same applies mutatis mutandis in the synchronic sense: if things were not conditional, they would not be determinable, would not be identifiable, would have no characteristics, would not exist. To exist is to have an outside. To be something is to be contrasted to something else, to exclude something. To be something is to not be something, and "not being something" is all that is required to be "conditional," because it means that X can exist "only on the condition" of not-being-X: there are places, times, conditions in which the state of "being-X" does not apply.

More searchingly, though, this would be true of any specific item even if we accept a commonsensical view of a universal causal determinism: if you remove any one item, however minute, all other things would change, would disappear, since everything is interdependent. But this still sounds like "without the cup there would be no hand, no feet—indeed, no sky, no rivers, no earth, no history, no sentient beings, no matter." How does it go so far as to also say "no Emptiness," seemingly something abstract and unchangeable, beyond the reach of causal interdependence?

Consider again the diagrammatic ambiguity example above. Let the letter O stand for the cup. Let the letter I stand for that table over there, or my hated enemies, or my object of desire, or some stage-setting fact about the world as I pre-understand it. O and I are parts of a single system of perception, as my cup and that table are parts of a single system: my Lebenswelt, my lived world, where all the pieces fit together. The cup presents itself to me this way because I see this way; I see this way because the cup presents itself to me this way. The world I inhabit is a world of greed/anger/delusion/self-view, and all elements of my perception are colored by the way they fit together in that total view. The specific quality of my delusional clinging to one way of viewing this figure—for example, as the letter rather than the number—involves a concomitant delusional view of all the other entities that fit together with it in a total system, its constitutive non-X's. To see this in a particular way constrains me to see other things in concomitantly particular ways.

Then someone teaches me about Emptiness: that means to see that the letter O is ambiguous, dependent upon context, that without changing in the least it is also readable as the number zero, or as a circle, or even as the corner of a triangle. When I cease seeing O as "the letter O," the context that constrained me to see I as "the letter I" is also removed. Now "I" also is released into a greater degree of ambiguity; it might be the lower-case letter L, or the number one, or a drawing of an upraised finger, and so forth.

Now, when I look at O, I can equally validly describe what I am seeing as the letter O or the number zero. But there's one more thing I can describe it as, one more thing I can indeed *see* it as: "illimitable ambiguity" itself. That is, the sense "illimitable ambiguity" is no more

conceptual and abstract than the sense "zero" or the sense "letter O"—in all cases I directly see the figure *as* that. However, I can never see illimitable ambiguity *simpliciter*: I always see it as some prior figure that is discovered to be illimitably ambiguous. That is, I see the O-as-letter as having more to it than just the letter, I apprehend its drift into "numberness" and illimitable other possible meanings right there in and as its "letterhood." Once I notice this illimitable ambiguity, I can see the figure as "ambiguously letter O" or "ambiguously number zero." But at the same time, once I have seen this I never really see that *figure* itself *simpliciter* anymore either; it is always a prior "moreness" or ambiguity that I am *disambiguating down* to this particular determinate figure. I can equally well describe what I see as "an ambiguous figure being read as a letter" and "an ambiguous figure being read as a number." What I am seeing is "an illimitably ambiguous figure," not a letter; the letterhood is in this case a modifier of the ambiguity rather than the ambiguity being a modifier of the letter. That is, it is not the ambiguity "of" the figure any more than it is the figure "of" the illimitable ambiguity. There is, we may say, an ambiguity even about which is the subject and which is the predicate. This is the deeper sense of thoroughgoing ambiguity. Illimitable ambiguity is every bit as much and as little concrete and directly perceived as the definite letter.

Now we ask, Is the illimitable ambiguity of letter O the same illimitable ambiguity as the illimitable ambiguity of number zero? They are not the same merely in the sense that "illimitable ambiguity" is an abstract noun that applies equally to these two instantiations. Rather, illimitable ambiguity is the kind of perception that cannot be definitely the illimitable ambiguity of any one figure, for this would limit its ambiguity. Illimitable ambiguity means "not definitely anything," so "not definitely letter O" is the same "not definitely" as "not definitely number zero." They are two sides of the same illimitable ambiguity. Given the illimitable ambiguity between subject and predicate, however, we must more strictly say that the illimitable ambiguity is neither the same nor different in the two cases.

Now we further ask, Is the illimitable ambiguity of the letter O the same ambiguity as the illimitable ambiguity of the letter I? The answer here is the same. This is less obvious, but exactly the same argument

applies: the illimitable ambiguity of one thing cannot be different from the illimitable ambiguity of another thing.

This is the idea picked up in Huayan Buddhism in the notion of Emptiness as something that cannot be divided, that is wholly present in and as each of its instantiations. But there is a further twist in Tiantai. We ask, Would the illimitable ambiguity of the letter I exist without the determinate existence of the letter O or of the number zero? (Not their ambiguity now, but their determinateness.) The answer, in Tiantai, is no. For I to be *illimitably* ambiguous is for letter-O-ness to exist: if we took away the determinacy "letter O," the letter I would not be illimitably ambiguous. There would be a definite limit to what it could be read as, to its ambiguity. We would know for sure that it cannot be "letter O," since there is no such coherence, no such perception, no such idea, no such possibility. Similarly, there would be no illimitable ambiguity for the letter I, or for anything else, without the characteristics of the number zero (not their ambiguity, but their definiteness). Every definiteness must be something that any other figure might possibly be read *as* for any illimitable ambiguity to exist for any determination at all. The nonexistence of O-ness would set a limit to the ambiguity of any other item, would make that item finally ontologically definite rather than ambiguous. Nothing anywhere would be empty if this cup were not determined in just this way as this cup. This is why in a Tiantai context we must speak of "inherent entailment of all specific phenomena in the nature of the Three Truths" (*xingju* 性具) rather than just, as in Huayan, "all things arising from the nature of Emptiness" (*xingqi* 性起).

Indeed, there is even an ambiguity between illimitable ambiguity and definiteness. To be definite can equally well be read as being illimitably ambiguous, and vice versa. To be definite is to be half of a two-step gesture of positing and transcending. Put in temporal terms, to be present is to be a definite disambiguation of the past and an opening out into the future. To be present is to have a future; to have a future is to be present. To be definite (present) is to be open to refutation and reversal (future). Put another way, to be something is to be perceived as something, to be perceived is to be perceived from some distance, and to be seen from some particular point at a distance is to be something only as interpreted from that particular place to be that something. To

be interpreted as something is to be open to alternate interpretations: the existence of any position in any kind of space implies the existence of space itself, which implies the existence of other positions; the existence of any distance implies the existence of other distances, so to be viewable from some distance is necessarily to be viewable from other distances. To be real is to be seeable from many alternate vantage points. (Only what is imaginary can be seen in just a single way or a single finite set of ways.) To be is to be infinite and infinitely various. This is the Center, the Third Truth.

The apprehension of this cup as this cup thus simultaneously limits and unlimits, determines and undetermines, every other entity. It determines every other entity as something that must coexist somehow with this cup, must fit into some provisionally coherent system with this cup. It undetermines every other entity as a further possibility of a determination of which that other entity must be readable as an aspect or instantiation. Any way of being expands the ways of being through which and as which any other way of being must be readable. Without this cup, that hat would not be hat, and also would not be illimitable-ambiguity-as-hat. Being hat and being hat-as-illimitable-ambiguity and being illimitable-ambiguity-as-hat are synonyms—as is also being illimitable-ambiguity-as-hat and being illimitable-ambiguity-as-cup. Such are the Three Truths.

We see here also that the statement "each thing is illusion" is exactly synonymous with "each thing is ultimate reality." What does "illusion" mean? In the absence of a contrast with at least one thing that is *not* an illusion (which is removed by the specification that *all* is illusion), "illusory" means nothing more and nothing less than "always and constitutively capable of being viewed otherwise so that all its present characteristics are no longer apparent." What I see appears *now*, and from *here*, using these tools, to be a dinosaur, but when I look more closely, or for a longer time, or from somewhere else, or with different tools, I realize it is really a movie prop made of wood and plaster and wires: dinosaur turns out, given more time and more perspectives, to also be non-dinosaur in every molecule. Each dinosaur attribute was also readable as a non-dinosaur attribute (woodenness, stringiness, lifelessness, etc.). An apple feels like a real apple; then I bite into it and discover it is made

of wax—it is a "fake" apple, its "appleness" has turned out to be illusory. But if "waxness" is not real, if there is no privileged realness anywhere, then this means also that this "waxness" turns out, when viewed from afar, to reveal "appleness."

So "illusory" means only "in all aspects viewable otherwise." But "reality" turns out to mean *exactly the same thing*: what is real is what is not one-dimensional or merely imagined by one person at one time, but what can be circumambulated, looked at from alternate sides, present itself in some continuity but in different contexts and showing different aspects of itself. If there were some fixed limit of the ways a thing could appear, that thing would be a fantasy rather than a reality. Finite things, strictly speaking, cannot exist! Illusion/infinity is the necessary mode of existence of all things. This is another way of translating the Three Truths. To be is to be determinate, is to be finite, is to be infinite, is to be real, is to be illusory, is to be conditioned, is to be unconditioned, is to be all other things that are equally determined/undetermined.

Ambiguity is a *synonym* for zero. "Emptiness" is a synonym for "this cup." "Cup" is another name for "Emptiness." Like the "99 names of God," these are various equally adequate and equally inadequate specifications of an infinite unconditional entity. This cup can be called "cup" or "Emptiness." This Emptiness manifest as cup, and manifest as anything else in a universe that contains the possibility of cup, can be called "Emptiness" or "cup"—or "number" or "Roman Empire" or "matter" or "will of God" or "pure evil" or "blissful light" or "pencil sharpener" or "spaghetti monster" or "square circle humming furiously backward" or "teapot orbiting Jupiter" or "seven ounces of water spilled on the ground near a statue of Columbus in Dayton, Ohio." These are all synonyms for *this*, which is simply a way of designating the only thing/nonthing that (illimitably ambiguously) exists. "Emptiness" is not the name of an abstract universal concept, but is a designator, almost a proper noun, for the concrete singular entity that is all things, complete with its modes of being, inclusive of all points of view that take all possible distorted views of itself as itself and as all others, which requires that it is not merely singular and that each of these things is not merely itself.

We can thus perhaps understand what Zhanran means when he asserts: "'The Total Field of All Phenomena [Dharmadhātu] is just an-

other name for the Three Truths" (*fajie zhishi sandi yiming* 法界秖是三諦異名).[4] The Three Truths are not a way of referring to an abstract fact *about* some separate thing that is the Total Field of All Phenomena; they are a direct concrete denotation, a name, of the Total Field of All Phenomena itself. The Total Field of All Phenomena is not empty; it is Emptiness. It is not provisionally posited; it is provisional positing. It is not the Center, absolute, non-dual; it is centrality, absoluteness, non-duality. This is why Zhanran also asserts, of the specific mutually exclusive determinate separate things as we experience them in ordinary life—this table, that chair—that they are themselves "a small portion of the conventional truth" (*shidi shaofen* 世諦少分);[5] they themselves are conventional truths, not merely something about which some statement could be conventionally true.

YOU ARE A FLOATING FINGER

Here's a helpful way to visualize and intuit these ideas. Hold your two index fingers about six inches in front of your eyes. Stare beyond them, focusing on the wall in the background. Now pull your fingertips apart slightly. Do you see a little sausage of a double-tipped finger floating there in the air? It should have a fingernail on each end (fig. 8.1.) That is what a "separate entity" is like in the Tiantai universe. It is, in your present purview, located "between" two other entities, your two index fingers. It is separate from them; it is "another" entity. But actually it is made entirely of those other entities that border and surround it, duplicated in a new form, encapsulated into a little packet of floating sausage. The left end of the finger on the right is superimposed over the right end of the finger on the left, and the result is a new entity, a double-ended finger, floating in the middle. This is the category mistake of all our ordinary experience. We see each thing as a separate entity, arrayed among a panorama of other mutually exclusive entities. But actually each one is all the ones around it, substantiated in our vision through a particular crimp of our vision. And you yourself—you are just such a floating sausage too. What you feel as your body, your mind, as a little self-enclosed packet of existence is actually the whole world around them, folded back into a superimposed illusion. The contents of the sausage are the same as

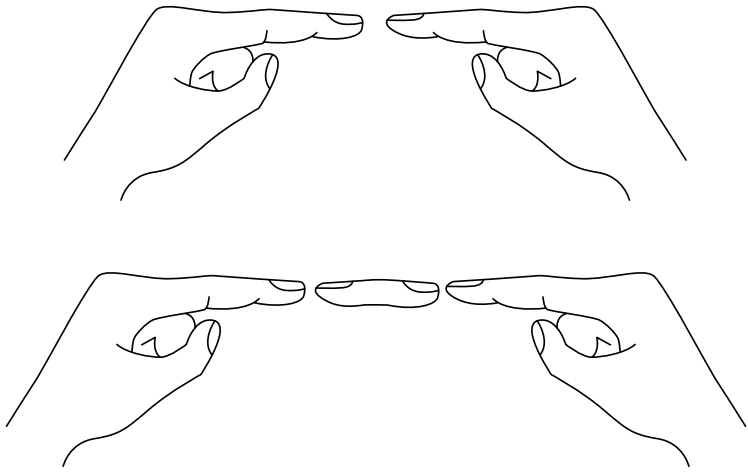

FIGURE 8.1. An illusory, synthetic double-tipped finger illustrates "separate identity" in the Tiantai universe.

what surrounds the sausage. It points out toward what points back at it, but what points toward it is itself pointing outward toward all else. You are the world, but in this uniquely crisscrossed, inverted form, the top transferred to the bottom and the bottom to the top, inside out. Pause for a few minutes and try to feel yourself as this floating finger, folding the entire universe into the inverted form of "you."

Jorge-Luis Borges wrote a story called "The Theologians" that can evoke some of the wonder of this idea. It tells the tale of two enemy souls turning out in the afterlife to be parts of one soul. Two rival theologians, Aurelian and John of Pannonia, try to outdo each other in their refutation and persecution of a heretical sect called the Histrioni. The abominable doctrine of these heretics held that "every man is two men, and that the real one is the *other* one, the one in heaven. They also imagined that our acts cast an inverted reflection, so that if we are awake, the other man is asleep; if we fornicate, the other man is chaste; if we steal, the other man is generous. When we die, they believed, we shall join him and *be* him." Though both are orthodox theologians warring with their pens against these heresies, Aurelian gets his rival John of Pannonia burned at the stake by pointing out ambiguous phrases in the latter's writings that

could be read as lending support to the anathematized Histrioni ideas. Here is the typically Borgesian end of the story:

> The end of the story can only be told in metaphors, since it takes place in the kingdom of heaven, where time does not exist. One might say that Aurelian spoke with God and found that God takes so little interest in religious differences that He took him for John of Pannonia. That, however, would be to impute confusion to the divine intelligence. It is more correct to say that in paradise, Aurelian discovered that in the eyes of the unfathomable deity, he and John of Pannonia (the orthodox and the heretic, the abominator and the abominated, the accuser and the victim) were a single person.[6]

To get the full Tiantai point, though, we have to extend Borges's lovely evocation even further. Roundness opposed sharpness, but it turned out that they were "parts" of the same thing. In fact, not even two separate parts—they were the very same thing. And in our previous example, double-pointing sausage finger opposed left-pointing finger and right-pointing finger, but it turned out that double-pointing sausage finger was the same as left- and right-pointing fingers. In Tiantai, unlike in our example, the same is true even of left-pointing finger and right-pointing finger themselves! Try to imagine this: both of those fingers are exactly as insubstantial as the sausage finger (fig. 8.2.) All of them are in the same situation. So in reality we would have to imagine not just our sausage-finger illusion between two "real" fingers but also a situation where all three fingers are just like the sausage: each is completely made of the other two fingers in the same way, so we cannot come to rest in any final irreducible starting point. Each of the fingers is reducible to all the others in the same way that the sausage finger is reducible to the two others, but at the same time each serves as the raw material from which the others are made, like the right and left fingers do to the sausage finger. And each stands as a distinguishable entity in its own right, different from the others: the left-pointing finger is not the right-pointing one nor the sausage finger, and vice versa. All are equally illusory, all are equally real. This is true for all things—even for the fingers on the sides, which in our experiment are "actual" and "real," not superimposed optical illusions. Even those other fingers are just floating fingers, made in turn from the superimposition of each other. In reality, there is no final stopping place that is the origin of the illusion except the entirety of all

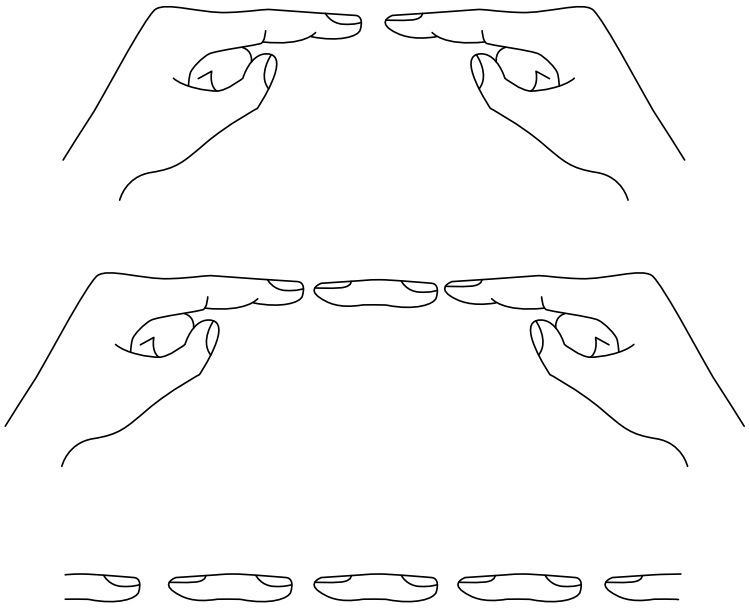

FIGURE 8.2. Each separate entity (here, floating sausage fingers) is distinct, but each comprises the superimposition of all entities.

possible views and qualities, which appears in each place as a separate little sausage finger.

Another way to think about this situation is to consider a magnet. It has a north and a south "pole" to it. If we wanted to separate the north from the south pole, we might try cutting it in half. But when we do so, we find that each half still has both a north and a south pole. No matter how many times we slice it, the total set of different characteristics pertaining to the whole is also found in that separate part: northness and southness are, in their entirety, found in what was formerly, in the context of the whole magnet, purely the north part and also in the former south part. This is how it is in the Tiantai universe: the universe is one big magnet, but instead of just a north and a south, it has three thousand different characteristic aspects: me-ness, you-ness, trains, oceans, dogs, soups, historical incidents, smiles, tears, delusion, enlightenment. If I try to isolate any of these, however, what I end up with is another entire "magnet," which also has all three thousand aspects to it: this me-ness, it

turns out, also has its you-ness part, its train part, its ocean part, its dog part, and so on. When I face you, it is me-and-you facing you-and-me. It is me-and-all-worlds facing all-worlds-and-me. It is the entire universe facing the entire universe. We are always different, because wherever we go, there is a you and a me, two different aspects, never merging into a blank indifferent mush of a single quality. But since me-and-you is contrasted to me-and-you, there is really no contrast at all: the same thing is found on both sides of the contrast. We are neither the same nor different. We are divided from ourselves, impossible to unify into a simple unity, but for that very reason we are impossible to separate from one another. To put it plainly, each of us, at each moment, is absolute, the Center at which all appears and which appears in all things. All things are our transformation bodies; we are the transformation body of all things.

WHAT YOU ARE AND HOW YOU ARE SEEN

Who are you? Who am I? We would like to think that we are something above and beyond the way we are labeled, the way we are seen and categorized by other people, by society, by the crude and rather heartless eyes of the world or some portion of the world, for we have so little control of how other people see us, and they view us so superficially and according to such infuriatingly alien agendas. We can never really be quite sure about what other people think of us; the subjectivity of the "other" is an eternal mystery, and however many professions of love and esteem we may succeed in securing, there is always, necessarily and structurally, an element of doubt, of anxiety: Are those people lying? Will they still think so a minute from now? How can I be sure?

It is perhaps to escape the terrible anxiety of this predicament, the treadmill, the quicksand, the hall of horrific funhouse mirrors that is our striving to attain some stable being by imprinting it on others who can reflect it back upon us, that we wish to conclude that we have a "true self" above and beyond what anyone may think. We might believe in a God who sees our true self, which licenses us to ignore the superficial views of our contemporaries, for God sees the heart, knows us in our true self. But this, if it is intended as a safeguard against anxiety, quickly backfires for the obvious reason that we are still handing over our being

to the viewpoint of *another being*: how God views us is the "final judgment" on what we really are, what we're really worth, *even if we ourselves disagree*! Perhaps, then, we might try to think of our true self and our true worth as something that is entirely untouched by this whole question of "how we are viewed," whether by humans or gods. "We simply are what we are!" we might declare. We are a fact of nature, or we are the pure Self, the *ātman*, which just is Brahman, the absolute reality underlying all things, whether anyone knows it or not. But there are problems here too: what does it really mean for something to just "be so" without being recognized, or at least recognizable, by someone or other? In fact, when we defiantly declare ourselves independent of the views of others, we are taking a view *on ourselves*! It is now one moment of our own experience that is taking a view on the rest of our being and deeming it a certain way; there is still an encounter and a judgment going on, a deeming, a naming, an identifying. Someone still has to "think well" of us: ourselves. Or rather, since we exist in time, we are condemned to a kind of relationship, at the very least, between the moments of time that make up our experience. One moment encounters, considers, identifies, judges another moment. For this reason, consciousness is constantly condemned to a deep anxiety; it is always in need of further confirmation, and each confirmation is continually slipping away and in need of a renewed confirmation.

So it is perhaps impossible to disentangle this question of *Who am I?*—the question of questions, perhaps—from the seemingly much shallower question *How am I seen?* Tiantai accepts that "what something is" is nothing more and nothing less than "how something is seen—by someone or other, from some perspective." "What it is" simply has no other coherent meaning. But its solution to the nightmarish insecurity that this insight brings, the endemic horror of the human condition, is to push it further, to more fully realize it, to radicalize it. For when you meet another person, you are really meeting all other people, all other beings. When a hungry ghost looks at you greedily as a potential meal, or an *asura* looks at you with rage and ridicule,[7] or a god looks at you with scoffing pity, in any of these cases, *all beings* are looking at you, *all beings* are judging you, and they are judging you *in all possible ways*! They are also a bodhisattva viewing you—and seeing you with compas-

sion, with affirmation, with total empathy for your situation. And they are also a Buddha viewing you—viewing you therefore as a Buddha, as an expression of himself, and indeed as the center of all existence, the ultimate reality, viewing you as that of which even he himself is a mere offshoot. Indeed, even when you see an inanimate object, or think of a past memory, or have any kind of experience, as we saw above, it is still an encounter between two beings. And therefore it is also an encounter between the Three Thousand and the Three Thousand; it is all beings viewing all beings in all ways. The fear of how you are seen, the fear of what you are, is solved by accepting it all the way: you are seen in all possible ways at all times, which means you really are all possible beings at all times.

NOT CHANGING, NOT STAYING THE SAME

From here we can begin to get a grasp of the Tiantai conception of time, which develops the *Lotus Sūtra*'s "new Middle Way" of time and timelessness. Most simply, we can say that for Tiantai Buddhists time simply *is* the continual "opening of the provisional to reveal the real"; it is an unceasing process of self-recontextualization where the past remains unchangeable and yet is constantly changing with each recontextualization. A moment of time is a recontextualization of the all the past. A firm grasp of this idea is crucial for avoiding the misconception that the Tiantai notion of inter-pervasion of past, present, and future, and of the "inherent inclusion" of all entities in each, might lead to something like a static picture of the universe foreclosing any genuine creativity. For in Tiantai, each moment of time is the bringing forth of not only a new set of changing events but also a new set of "eternal principles"—omnipresent conditions, rules, requirements, regularities, coherences, laws, universals. Each moment is effectively the creation of a new space-time that determines anew the character of the everything in the universe and of all the past and future.

In order for time to pass, there must be a contrast between two different states: the past and the present. The present moment must be "different from" the past moment in order for the present moment to "occur" at all. But for this difference to register, the two moments must

somehow be contrasted to each other. To be contrasted, they must coexist, which means they must both be there to be contrasted. But this is impossible if they are really different and mutually exclusive. There are multiple causes for the arising of any state, at least two qualitatively distinct entities. Most fundamentally, any state that is finite, that has any identifiable character, is contrasted with and excludes some other state. Suffering and non-suffering can only be what they are, can only meaningfully be said to exist as such, by being contrasted to each other and excluding each other. Since this contrast and exclusion is necessary to their definitions and identities, it can never be eradicated from them; it is "internal" to their identities to "have an outside." So in the heart of their definitions there is a kind of contradiction: they cannot be the sole cause of themselves, or of their own apparent attributes, since these always depend on precisely whatever they by definition exclude. This fundamental "twoness" is hidden in the depths of every apparent "oneness."

This also makes all things "impermanent" in a very thoroughgoing sense. I am me, but to be me is to be me-and-you. You are you, but to be you is to be you-and-me. Neither of these states can be eternally the case or the sole allowable interpretation of the total twoness. Suffering and non-suffering alternate (the pace and ratios, even the sequence, are irrelevant here). What is conditional—that is, having more than one cause, not being caused by itself or its own "essence" alone—is necessarily impermanent. It alone can never ensure its own continued presence (or ensure that the total twoness "X plus non-X" will always be interpreted or felt as X rather than non-X). The threat of suffering is itself a kind of suffering, and this threat is an implicit lurking presence even in non-suffering, since it must inevitably revert to suffering, hence angst, anxiety, fear, insecurity. Even if, impossibly, a state of bliss were to have infinite duration, it would still be "impermanent" in this sense of conditionality. It would always stand in danger of being "reread" as the suffering to which it is contrasted, which is inside it "as" its outside, making it equally interpretable as a state of suffering. It is this constant danger of being reinterpreted that is the essence of inescapable suffering, because to be finite is to be reinterpretable. Any given finite thing can never singlehandedly ensure how it will be interpreted, what identity it will be

seen to have; this always depends on contexts, additional factors. But these are necessary consequences of being a finite, conditional being—in other words, a being who can never be the sole cause of what happens to him, a being that is a twoness (at least) disguised as a oneness. The problem, in short, is the classical Buddhist problem: the concept of self. However, this means specifically taking one's self to be a "thing," defined in the above way: as one entity or state or condition rather than another, with a fixed essence and a certain set of characteristics rather than others, for which to exist and not to exist would be mutually exclusive, an entity that definitively includes and excludes some set of characteristics. But precisely because it makes things so thoroughgoingly impermanent, it also makes them permanent. It is impossible for any moment ever to be completely "over," for the absolute difference between moments is just as impossible as their absolute identity.

So the surreal wholesale transformation of identity from moment to moment presented by classical Buddhism, and described in this book's chapter 3, is obviously not the whole story, phenomenologically speaking. If it were, we would be speaking of the psychotic world of experience before the advent of what psychologists call a sense of "object-permanence," which is usually acquired by infants in the first year of life. Baby is surprised when I spring out for peek-a-boo after disappearing behind a napkin; for her, I had vanished when I was no longer seen, and my reappearance is a miraculous new arrival. For Baby, what is not seen does not exist at that moment; for adults, what is not seen anymore has simply gone "elsewhere." Many schools of Buddhism would say that the baby is right and the adult is wrong about this! The whole idea of object-permanence, in this view, is a misconception—the primal misconception. When something goes somewhere else, it is in fact something else, so it is impossible for something to go elsewhere. Going elsewhere is becoming something else. Such is the implication of the standard doctrines of impermanence and Emptiness. But according to Tiantai, neither the infant nor the adult is correct. Each thing's identity is indeed determined by its present context, so it cannot simply remain "the same thing" even when removed to a different context. But at the same time, it is always involved in *another* context, *more than one* context—therefore, it has *more than one identity*!

Among these contexts is its prior identity in its previous context; the past moment of time is another context for the present moment of time. The foot is a foot because it is attached to a body. When it is cut off, that attachment is severed and (soon) ceases to be a foot. But it is also a foot because it is attached to something else—not something in space, but something in time: the prior state of being a foot. The foot remains a foot to the extent that it is contextualized also by its connection to a prior history of being a foot—that is, of having been attached to the body. So when I see the foot cut off, I still see it in the context of its prior attached state and to other feet I may see on bodies with similar shapes, and thus it remains, for a time, a foot. It remains roughly itself; it has a kind of continuity with its past rather than an identity with its past. There is no real object-permanence, nor is there the constant random replacement of one identity by another.

We can say all things are impermanent, as in early Buddhism, but now we know this means "impermanent-permanent." We can say all things are permanent, meaning "permanent-impermanent." We can say some things are permanent and others are impermanent, meaning "some-all are permanent-impermanent" and "all-some are impermanent-permanent." But note that this does not mean "permanent-impermanent" is the real truth, while "permanent" and "impermanent" are both one-sided distortions. That would be what Tiantai critiques as the "exclusive Center." Rather, just as "permanent" *really* means "impermanent-permanent," "impermanent-permanent" *really* means "permanent" or *really* means "impermanent," because impermanent-permanent appears *as* permanence and *as* impermanence, and each of these is the entirety, not a mere part, of the whole. To be permanent is already to also be impermanent; there is no other permanence. To be impermanent is already to also be permanent; there is no other impermanence. All is funny, all is serious, all is funny-serious. Each is a perfectly equal synonym for all three. Each is an equally adequate-inadequate description of the truth.

The same applies in all other cases. We can say all is suffering, meaning "suffering-bliss"; we can say all is bliss, meaning "bliss-suffering." We can say all is mind, meaning "mind-matter"; we can say all is matter, meaning "matter-mind." We can say there is a God, meaning "God-Godless"; we can say there is no God, meaning "Godless-God." We can say all

is illusion, meaning "illusion-reality"; we can say all is reality, meaning "reality-illusion." We can say some things are true and some things are false, meaning "some-all is true-false and all-some is false-true." We can say there is historical progress, meaning "progress-stagnation"; we can say there is historical stagnation, meaning "stagnation-progress." We can say society is evil, meaning "evil-good"; we can say society is good, meaning "good-evil." We can say we are sometimes happy and sometimes sad, meaning "we-everyone are sometimes-always happy-sad and sometimes-always sad-happy." And so on. How should we choose which we will say at any time? If all things are sayable in some sense, what should we say right now? Generally speaking, we should say whatever we judge to be most conducive to liberation from suffering in this particular situation and context. But that means, in the Tiantai context, to say in all situations whatever we judge to be most conducive to *liberation from one-sided attachments*.

THE ETERNITY OF ALL MOMENTS AND THE ULTIMATE REALITY OF ALL EXPERIENCES

This is precisely the status of Tiantai's shocking slogans, such as the claim that "all moments are permanent" and "all appearances are the ultimate reality." These slogans mean what they say, of course: no moment ever ends, and however anything appears to anyone for however long is the ultimate reality that all things emerge from, all things return to, that explains and supports and sustains all things. True enough. The opposite would also be true. But these particular claims are emphasized in classical Tiantai writings to offset the more common one-sided prejudices that tend the other way. Because the impermanence of things and the illusoriness of appearances is stressed in the rest of Buddhism, it is assumed that anyone getting to Tiantai will already be aware of this side of reality and indeed may be in danger of clinging to it. So Tiantai asserts the opposite, which is equally true.

This is the case for the new stress on *permanence* as opposed to the traditional Buddhist preoccupation with impermanence. We have begun to see the basis for this. *Every moment lasts forever.* How is that true? A moment, to be a moment, must be surrounded by other moments, from

which it differs. "Now" must be different from "then." But that means "now" must *relate* to "then." The "then" is part of the world of the "now," against which it defines itself, to which it stands in necessary contrast. This contrast cannot be either internal or external to the "now" and to the "then." "Now" is really "now-then," and "then" is really "then-now."

This is easy to understand if we consider the state of the entire totality of being at moment M and at moment M+1. The state of things at M is thought to have the power to cause the arising of the state of things at M+1. But if M is gone when M+1 arrives, it cannot "reach" M+1 to do anything to it; it is already gone, nonexistent, and thus can do nothing. If the state of things at M continues to exist when M+1 arrives, however, time has failed to move ahead, or we must admit the coexistence of two alternate total states of being at the same time. If the appearance of M+1 does not necessitate the disappearance of M (which by our hypothesis possesses the power to bring about M+1), M would continue to generate precisely M+1 repeatedly forever.

In either case, time would not be possible and no real entities could arise. The past lives on in the present and the future; the future is findable back in the past. Your childhood lives in you now; it continues to change as you change. Your death lives in you now; however your present changes, that future remains findable within it. The past is not yet over; every moment of the present reveals more about the past and its infinite changes. The present never begins; however far back you look, you will always be able to find all the characteristics of the present there, unchanged.

All appearances are the ultimate reality. How is that true? Normally we believe that in some kind of appearance-versus-reality contrast—for example, I thought that was a snake, but upon closer inspection it turned out to be a rope. This is what most of Buddhism also says: I thought there was a self, but it turned out to be a bunch of impermanent aggregates. Or, I thought there was a world, but it turned out to be all mind, or Buddha-nature, or illusion. Common sense assumes this too: the rim of my glass looks oval, but in fact I know that "really" it is round; it's just that I'm seeing it from an angle that foreshortens it. The rainbow is a mere appearance; when we go to touch it, we find nothing there. But the clouds and sunlight are real; they are what it really is, what it turns

out to really be. Tiantai, however, makes the preposterous claim that the oval and the circle are both true; in fact, both are the ultimate reality, are findable in all things and at all times and places, are the Absolute. The rainbow and the cloudy sunlight—both true, both absolutely true, both the Absolute. The "self" and the impermanent aggregates—both true, both absolutely true, both the Absolute. The snake and the rope—both true, both absolutely true, both the Absolute. All is illusion. All is reality. Time is not an illusion. Time is the illusoriness of every possible thing. "Time" is a word that means "whatever you think is so is already not so." What is real? What you can go back to, look at again, check up on, verify, reexamine. But there is literally *no* experience that you can go back to, so there is none that is real. What is illusion? Something that turns out to be otherwise than it appears. There is no thing of which this is not the case. The horn "appeared" to be round but "turned out" to be "sharp." But both roundness and sharpness are equally unreal, equally real. Each is determined by the context in which it is seen. Taking the unnameable whole into account, they too are unnameable, neither sharp nor round. "Roundness" and "sharpness" are two names for the same thing, which is round, sharp, neither round nor sharp, and both round and sharp.

The same goes for the famous Tiantai claim that "evil is inherently included in Buddhahood." Future Buddhahood lives in past delusion, so delusion is "Buddhahood-delusion." Past delusion lives in future Buddhahood, so Buddhahood is "delusion-Buddhahood." But we will face the intricate implications of that seemingly hazardous or nihilistic doctrine directly in the final chapter of this book.

NINE

EXPERIENCING TIANTAI

Experiments with Tiantai Practice

TIANTAI BUDDHIST PRACTICE IS AN IMMENSE ARSENAL OF techniques and practices, a pharmacy in which every imaginable medication is made available. After all, following the *Lotus Sūtra*, Tiantai regards all Buddhist practices (and even non-Buddhist practices) as part of a single vehicle: none are to be excluded, all are to be "opened up" and shown to lead to Buddhahood. This is just what Zhiyi, the founder of Tiantai Buddhism, tries to do in his works on meditation. He gives a practical description of all the traditional meditations of Buddhism known to him, both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna, and then "opens them up" by applying Tiantai Three Truths contemplation to them, showing that all of them are ways to reach the ultimate if supplemented and recontextualized in this way.

Here I will not go through the vast and intricate ways he crisscrosses and stair-steps and inter-nests them, although it is fascinating and creative achievement. Zhiyi's procedure is not at all a rote application of a formula, but rather an extremely innovative discovery in each specific case of how that particular approach can be opened up—much as a master wit may find the specific ambiguity or potential irony in a serious statement and make a joke of it, with perfect timing. Zhiyi cracks the Tiantai punch line to all practices. It is well worth studying how he does it. But here I'd like to give a streamlined account of the basic procedure of a Tiantai meditation derived from Zhiyi's approach, rendering a usable kernel of that practice for modern readers who are not necessarily interested in the minutiae of the historical record. How would one go about internalizing and actualizing the Tiantai ideas?

THE THREE-THOUSANDFOLD FLOATING FINGER

The basic procedure of Tiantai meditation is a particular application of the Nāgārjunian theoretical demonstrations of Emptiness via a reductio ad absurdum of the premise that a given object is a specific conditional entity, mutually exclusive with its causes and effects, and indeed, definitionally, with whatever it is not. This is done, it should be recalled, through the rejection of all possible causal accounts of its existence as such—namely, that it is self-caused, other-caused, caused by both, and caused by neither. This procedure is applied by Zhiyi to our consciousness itself in several distinct ways. The simplest way takes up the assumption of common sense, that my mind perceives an external world that causes me to have consciousness of it—in other words, my consciousness is caused by something other than my consciousness, such as my brain and the externally existing world, and there is a causal relation between the perceived or conceived object and our consciousness of it. A version of the same argument is applied to the relation between any content and what is contrasted to it conceptually for its determination—for example, the relation between blackness and whiteness, or longness and shortness. And finally, as we have already begun to see and shall explore in further detail as a form of meditation, assuming that both of the above two realist possibilities have been excluded, a related argument is applied to the temporal sequence of moment after moment of awareness that is considered purely immanent to consciousness itself. In all cases the point is to show that the assumption of a finite conditional entity is incoherent, through an examination of its putative relations with putatively other entities and the putative boundaries that putatively separate and limit them. When these relations and boundaries are shown to be impossible, the object has been shown not to be merely finite and conditional, as was originally assumed.

As a first approach we ask, What accounts for my present consciousness of this object before me—for example, this cup? Is it just the cup itself? In that case the consciousness of the cup should occur even if I am not present, which is not the case. Is it just my mind? In that case the consciousness of the cup should occur whenever my mind exists, which is not the case. Is it both of these together as normal objectivist realism

would suppose? But the consciousness of the cup is not present in either the cup as such or my mind as such, and as adding zero to zero cannot get us beyond zero, adding together two absences of any item X should not produce a presence of X, assuming X is mutually exclusive with all that is not X. Is it produced by neither? Then the consciousness of the cup should occur randomly at any time and place—for example, on the surface of the moon or the bottom of the ocean, which is not the case. We can also apply this interrogation to our awareness of the world as a whole, however we conceive it. Does it exist because of the world, or because of our mind, or both, or neither? All are rejected as incoherent, and thus it is concluded that this putative entity, our awareness of the world, cannot really be a mutually exclusive entity; it is also what it seemed to exclude—the world—and the world is it. This is taken to be the implication of seeing the Emptiness of its putative identity as definitive, merely a conditional entity that excludes everything that it is not. This is just another way we are reminded that Emptiness in Tiantai, as opposed to in orthodox interpretations of Nāgārjuna, is expanded to mean the Three Truths—empty, provisionally posited, and the Center—as mutually identical. So in demonstrating via reductio ad absurdum that our consciousness is empty, we have also shown it to be provisional and the middle—the all-inclusive, absolute, intersubsumptive entirety of the Total Field of All Phenomena itself.

The technique here is designed to undo a habitual conceptual frame that normally saturates our every moment of experience with presuppositions that prevent this experience: the presupposition of the mutual externality of finite entities, an unreflective ontological commitment and grasping of mutual exclusivity of finite entities, conditioned by our desire, which needs the object of desire to exclude all contrary states. The technique is to apply a reductio ad absurdum to this assumption: by showing that all possible accounts of this present experience that assume it to be exclusive of some other thing, to be non-unconditional, non-omnipresent, non-all-encompassing—in other words, to be finite, definite, non-ambiguous, exclusive of what it is not—make it impossible to comprehend how this present experience can be present right here and now, how it got here, where it came from. Nor, conversely, can we legitimately say that this moment is "the same as" any other state,

for such sameness would also presuppose real otherness, the existence of a real other state to which this moment could be the same. To say two states are the same is really just a somewhat misleading way of saying that there is only one state where there had appeared to be two, not that the true relation between the two states is one of sameness rather than difference. Therefore the idea that this experience is merely a conditional entity in particular, to the exclusion of other or opposite experiences, is incoherent. Such a conditional entity as this present experience, to the exclusion of all others or the same as any other, never arises; it is unobtainable. There simply are no other states or entities. Whatever this present experience is, it is not the sort of entity than which there could be anything "other."

Let us slowly explore what this might mean. Feel yourself again as the floating finger. You are a transposed version of all that is around you, a layered superimposition of world on world, an inverted form of the world, a transposed double-sided pointer pointing beyond yourself, pointed at by everything around you. What are the other fingers that point at you? What are the other fingers to which your very being, the double-sided pointing that is you, points? In other words, what is that external world with which you are confronted?

Tiantai meditation most centrally applies a method called "the contemplation of mind" (*guanxin* 觀心), alternately known as "awareness of mentation" (*jueyi* 覺意) or "following one's own mentation" (*suiziyi* 隨自意), given its most famous formulation in Zhiyi's unfolding of *yiniansanqian* 一念三千 (Japanese: *ichinensanzen*), which means something like "One Moment of Experience as the Three Thousand Aspects of Existence." The "Three Thousand" is, of course, a way of saying "everything," but it is really something a bit more than that, for as Zhiyi himself points out, any number would be an equally accurate possible way to talk about the totality of all things, from none to infinity.[1] This number, "three thousand," is concocted specifically with meditational practice in mind. Table 9.1 shows how it is derived.

Please note a few peculiarities of this way of listing "what exists." First, special care is taken here to include both "purgatories" and "Buddhas"—that is, the demonic thoughts, practices, and consequences of extreme subjective delusion and suffering, on the one hand, and the

TABLE 9.1. DERIVATION OF THE THREE THOUSAND ASPECTS OF EXISTENCE

Ten Realms	x	Ten Realms	x	Ten Suchnesses	x	Three Worlds = Three Thousand
Buddhahood		Buddhahood		Appearance		Five Aggregates
Bodhisattva		Bodhisattva		Nature		
Pratyekabuddha[1]		Pratyekabuddha		Components		
Śrāvaka[2]		Śrāvaka		Capability		
Gods		Gods		Action		Sentient Beings
Humans		Humans		Causes		
Asuras[3]		Asuras		Conditions		
Animals		Animals		Effects		
Hungry Ghosts		Hungry Ghosts		Consequences		Environment
Purgatories		Purgatories		Ultimate Equality and Equal Ultimacy from Beginning to End		

[1]Literally "self-enlighteners"—those who attain enlightenment on their own, without a teacher, and never preach it to others: lone and unknown enlightened ones. The term is also interpreted in East Asia to mean "enlightened through contemplation of conditionality." Pratyekabuddhas and śrāvakas are sometimes collectively known as "the Two Vehicles" or the "Hīnayāna."

[2]Literally "voice-hearers," disciples of a Buddha who attain arhatship, extinction from the world of birth and death, through the Four Noble Truths.

[3]Angry "titan"-like figures in Indian mythology, competitive and egomaniacal.

enlightened thoughts, practices, and consequences of the greatest wisdom and liberation, on the other hand. This is important because it cautions us against viewing these subjective states, good or evil, as mere epiphenomena that are somehow outside the ultimate reality. They are themselves included in the ultimate reality. By including these terms, Tiantai guards against a vague notion of "everything" that might lend itself to thinking that only a pure or neutral substance—mind, matter, energy—is what is real, or that the values and perspectives, good and bad, painful and pleasant, living beings experience are not part of the "everything." The "everything" that is included in each moment of experience, and that is eternally ineradicable, includes all of those good and bad *subjective* states as well. It is, we might say, everything, as well as every possible way of viewing and experiencing this everything, and every way of viewing all these views, and so on.

Second, we have ten oddly deliberate reduplications, alternate ways of viewing the same thing, that have a great significance. The ten realms are all the states in which a sentient being might find himself or herself in the Buddhist universe, from the lowest ignorance and suffering to the highest bliss and enlightenment. These states are often interpreted symbolically, with Buddhahood representing a moment of enlightened experience; bodhisattvahood a moment of compassion; śrāvakahood a moment of serene renunciation of the worldly; Godhood a moment of great worldly bliss and power; and asurahood a moment of egoistic rage and combativeness, animals ignorance, purgatories suffering. One reason to read these terms not merely as macro-level states of physical rebirth but also as passing psychological micro-level states that any being might undergo is that each of the ten realms is listed twice. This is because each realm "includes" or "instantiates" all the other ten realms—that is, each can appear "as" any of the others, and in fact nothing appears that is not always "as" something else. So we have not just a human, a bodhisattva, and an animal, a god—one after another, side by side—but rather a human-bodhisattva, an animal-god, a Buddha-demon, an asura-śrāvaka, and so on. A bodhisattva, traditionally, can manifest as a human, an animal, a Buddha, or an asura. But this means that bodhisattvahood includes all of these "other" states, that to be a bodhisattva does not exclude being a human or an animal sometimes. A bodhisattva can sometimes have the experience of being a human, an animal, or a god. But this also means a human can have the experiences of a bodhisattva, or a demon as an animal, or a śrāvaka as a hungry ghost, and so forth. Of course this goes on ad infinitum; each of these included realms further includes all ten realms, and so on. The ten times ten is just to point to this factor of mutual inclusion and to make sure it is accounted for in our meditative contemplation of "what exists."

Another important duplication comes in the "Three Worlds," where we have "the five aggregates" but also "sentient beings." Actually, these are two ways of looking at the same thing. Early Buddhism taught that what we call a sentient being—you, me, Bill, Dave—is actually a set of five aggregates: momentarily arising and perishing impersonal processes of material form, sensations, perceptions, volitions, and moments of consciousness. The set of aggregates was real, the unitary sentient

being ("the self") was a pernicious illusion. The Three Thousand includes both. In other words, it does not exclude the illusions about things among the totality of "what exists"—as we've seen, all things are equally illusions and equally true. The view of you as Bill is one item in the list; the view of you as five impersonal aggregate processes is another item on the list. Here too we have a shorthand way of pointing to a larger principle and a goad to keep it in mind in our contemplation of "all that exists." We are not to think of a set of real entities lined up side by side, mutually exclusive, of which there may be some additional erroneous views. Rather, the erroneous views are part of all that exists; indeed all that exists is some erroneous (i.e., one-sided, locally coherent) view. There is no "thing" as such; a thing is just a way of appearing and comes with a viewpoint upon it.

Tiantai insists further that to have any single viewpoint requires at least one additional viewpoint, and so on ad infinitum. Normally we drain off the ambiguity and call it "subjectivity," "free will," or "the unknown future" on one side and leave the "reality" on the other side, calling it "objectivity," "determinate fact," or "the settled past." In Tiantai these are inseparable, merely aspects artificially separated off from the whole, which is always both fixed and open, locally coherent and globally incoherent.

Indeed, the third of the Three Worlds, environment, is really also an alternate view of the living being. It is simply a flip-flop of foreground and background. Looking at the whole with the living being in the central foreground, we call organism-environment by the one-sided name "organism" (which can be described either as impersonal aggregates or as personalized sentient being). Looking at the same whole organism-environment with the environment in the foreground, we call it "environment." They are the same shape, the same outline/inline, viewed in two different ways, like a two-dimensional drawing of a three-dimensional cube that can be seen as either convex or concave.

The other factor here is the "Ten Suchnesses" from chapter 2 of Kumārajīva's translation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which are given there as the "ultimate reality of all things" realized only between a Buddha and a Buddha.[2] These give both a synchronic and a diachronic account of any particular item of experience. The first five of these suchnesses point to

the way it looks on the outside, its internal structure and composition and character, its powers and its present activities. The next four put it in a larger context and trace its development across time: the causes and conditions that produced it and the subsequent effects and consequences of its actions. Its entire context, both spatially and temporally, is thus invoked. But note that these too are not really separate factors; the tenth item, in fact, is precisely an indication of the mutual interfusion of these nine elements, with each of them equally ultimate—that is, an equally valid way of singling out one factor as the emblem of the entire process. Item ten is itself an assertion that items one through nine are just nine alternate views of the same total process—and as such presents a *tenth* alternate view of that process. So again, we do not have three thousand separate particular items, but a way of seeing all things from all angles in all ways, and then having those ways of seeing themselves seen in all ways, and so on ad infinitum.

This is the world that is to be contemplated in classical Tiantai meditation. Zhiyi goes on to tell us that this infinite array of interesting and ramifying factors, of views of things and views of views, is present right here as this moment of your experience, this moment of you being you, this moment of you-ness. In fact, he tells us that the relation between your present experience and all of these interlocking possible other experiences is like that between "a thing" and "its characteristics." Here is this pearl; it is white, hard, round. Whiteness, hardness, roundness are its characteristics. Zhiyi says that these three thousand worlds are the whiteness, hardness, and roundness, and you at this moment are the pearl. They are what make you, what you are made of. If they are taken away, there is no further you left. And if you, the pearl, are taken away, then this whiteness, hardness, and roundness are also gone. It is like the relation of the mind to the world given in the description of the purified body in chapter 19 of the *Lotus Sūtra*: the body is a mirror whose aspect is made of the appearance of all the worlds.[3] When you look at the body, you see all worlds. Similarly, when you look at *you*, at your mind right now, what you see is all worlds. You are the floating finger. The world "out there around you" is also the world of which you are made.

More specifically, in the context of meditation, Zhiyi compares the Three Thousand not just to any characteristics, but specifically to the

temporal characteristics of a thing: its arising, duration, alteration, and perishing.[4] The thing and the arising-duration-alteration-perishing, the career of the thing, the coming to be and being there of the thing, are really just two ways of indicating the very same entity. Me and my lifetime are the same thing. If I give up my lifetime, there is no me left. "Your money or your life" is a false choice: "you" cannot give up "your life" and still be around to have the money. So it is for you and the world and all of its alternate views on itself: the world is your life.

Zhiyi's most distinctive method, in his magnum opus the *Mohezhiguan*, is to first invoke all of these three thousand aspects of life, of the world, of the surrounding universe, in space and in time. As in the *Lotus Sūtra*, we are taken on an imaginative exercise in horizon expansion: each realm, each being, each environment, each type of appearance and nature and body and power and activity is described, is brought to mind; our attention is stretched out to consider them one by one. We are asked to be aware of everything we are aware of, and then to be aware of one more thing, until we can think of no more. "Be aware of everything you are aware of" is asking you to perform a tautology, something that is necessarily true. But it is also impossible to ever reach an end; there is always more. To be aware of all you are aware of turns out to be not just a tautology but *also* an impossibility. This necessity-as-impossibility is of course the Three Truths. It is manifested here through this exercise of always being aware of one more thing, revealing the very structure of the production of contents of consciousness, the strange way each additional item is both always already there included in the "everything I'm aware of" and one additional item added to that totality—the Three Truths in their concrete operation as every moment of consciousness.

But Zhiyi's method offers a very particular way to induce this realization. After he has offered this exhaustive list of the thinkable—of *all* the thinkable, or at least as much of the thinkable as our imagination can reach right now—Zhiyi asks us to contemplate the mind that has just imagined all of these things. Would they have manifested without this mind? It is like the lightbulb in a movie projector or the electric source that makes the projector run: it is the key item that animates and illuminates all of these possible worlds into present awareness for us. It seems that our mind *produced* all of these images, all of these realities

it perceives or conceives or imagines. But did it produce them as things that are then left to exist outside of the mind? Or are they more like ripples in a medium? Is it inside those things or outside them?

It seems that our mind in some sense *encompasses* all of these images, all of these realities it perceives or conceives or imagines, like space encompassing stars and planets. But is our mind one thing and the images it imagines, produces, and contains something else? If so, if one ends at a place or time before the other begins, how could they be in contact, how could one affect each other? Are they just accidental things that only now appeared in this mind, or are they part of its own nature? What is the mind's own nature? What is the mind? Is it the mind of right now, this moment of thought, or the thought of a few minutes ago when we were contemplating these images of all that exists one by one? What is the relation between that thought and this thought? Can they be mutually exclusive? If one ends before the other begins, or if both end before some medium containing both begins, how can any influence pass between them? Or does the present moment of thought include, in the form of its retention of those previous acts of imagination, those previous moments?

Invoking the Tiantai theoretical ideas discussed in the previous chapter, Zhiyi concludes that this single moment of thought inherently includes all of those worlds—and not only includes but *inherently* includes: they are its own inalienable nature. Without them this single moment of thought would not be what it is; indeed it would not exist at all. Moreover, this moment of thought inherently includes all other moments of thought, all other ways of imagining, in the same way: it cannot be completely inside or outside them. In fact, he tells us, "inclusion" and "production" are both merely provisional ways of describing the matter. Actually, a single moment of mentation neither includes nor produces all of these things; it *is* them, like the pearl and its whiteness, like the left and right fingers and the central floating sausage finger. The world surrounds you like the fingers pointing at this little floating sausage finger; they are outside it and inside it; they are contrasted to it and they are what it is made of. It is an inverted overlapping transposition of all that surrounds it. And the past moment, when you were conceiving all of those things, and the future moment, when your mind takes on another shape and

color, surround this present moment; they are outside it and inside it, they are contrasted to it, and they are also all it is made of. This moment is an inverted overlapping transposition of all the moments that precede and follow it.

ONLY A BUDDHA TOGETHER WITH A BUDDHA: THE ULTIMATE REALITY AS EACH MOMENT OF EXPERIENCE

We mentioned above that one of the ten realms factored into this equation of all that exists, in addition to the realms of humans, animals, gods, and so forth, is the realm of "Buddhahood." This aspect of Buddhahood is worth pausing over. What exactly is this aspect of "enlightened experience" that is entailed in each moment of experience? Again, it is not a separate, discrete item, but a reduplication and repackaging of all the others, an alternate way of viewing them. It is Buddhahood as presented in the *Lotus Sūtra*—not a realm that is additional to the nine other realms, but rather a certain way of seeing and experiencing those other nine realms. It is, to be specific, a realm that beholds all the other realms of experience, and beholds them as aspects of itself, and therefore also as aspects of one another. It is the seeing of all the other realms as integrated into oneself as upāyas, "skillful means," ways of expressing and eliciting Buddhahood. Buddhahood, in the *Lotus Sūtra*, is not the transcending of all conditional states, but the intersubsumptive availability of all possible conditional states as skillful means. It is not the transcending of skillful means, remember, but the access to and intersubsumption of all skillful means. The realm of Buddhahood is the vision of the other nine realms as locally coherent, as globally incoherent, as intersubsumptive, as non-dual, as skillful means, as expressions of Buddhahood.

Early Buddhism analyzed experience into a kind of conditional encounter between a sense organ and a sense object, from which arises a moment of conscious experience. There are three elements here: the sense organ, the sense object, and the resulting consciousness produced by that encounter. In the Tiantai version, experience is still an encounter, but when your sense organ encounters a thing in the world, it is all ten realms encountering all ten realms. It is a demon encountering a bodhisattva. It is a demon encountering a demon. It is a bodhisattva

encountering a bodhisattva. It is a god encountering a hungry ghost. It is a meeting between a śrāvaka and an asura. And of course it is also a meeting between a Buddha and a Buddha.

Your experience of this cup on the table is a Buddha (the cup) together with a Buddha (your eye and nervous system). And here we have an inspired elaboration of that mysterious phrase back in chapter 2 of the *Lotus Sūtra*: "Only a Buddha together with a Buddha realize the ultimate reality of all things."[5] Every moment of experience is the ultimate reality of all things, because every moment of experience is a Buddha (as the Three Thousand) together with a Buddha (as the Three Thousand). As Zhiyi puts it, a moment of experience is the entire universe meeting the entire universe, with the entire universe arising as a result.[6] Of course, the "entire universe" here is "the Three Thousand"—that is, all phenomena seeing all phenomena in all possible ways, as seen by a Buddha, as provisional, empty, and the Center; as the mastery of all things; as both the skillful expressions and the indirect causes of his own Buddhahood.

ESSENTIALS OF TIANTAI MEDITATION

But the specificities of this three-thousandfold characterization of the world in which you are is rooted in traditional medieval Buddhist mythology. We can perhaps try our hand at reformulating the Tiantai approach in a much more straightforward and accessible way.

It should first be noted that Tiantai contemplation of the mind is specifically the contemplation not of some general or universal entity called "mind," but of a specific moment of consciousness occurring in the life of a specific sentient being at a particular place and time. As such, it is necessarily biased, incomplete, conditional, deluded, and suffering. It is a contemplation of the *deluded* mind; this mirror that you are is a distorting mirror, an inversion and transposition of the world around it. What is its primary distortion? It *disambiguates*. It makes the world appear to itself in a manageable form that suits its own attachments and projects, acting as the light that presences it and the energy source that animates it as a particular situation. It filters down and processes this world so that it manifests in three thousand distinct, contrasted, but mutually entailing and identical ways, as if it were an array of three

thousand separate real fingers, placed side by side, where each is one thing and one thing only, where each particular characteristic is definitively what it is and nothing else: the sky is blue, the pearl is white, this is long, that is short, I am I, you are you, this is pleasant, that is unpleasant. It is this act of animating and presencing by disambiguating the three-thousandfold world into a world of three thousand separate, definitive items that is the focus of our meditation.

To begin, then, we need a purely intellectual understanding of the fact of Emptiness—*not* yet an experiential insight into it. That means to understand, on purely logical grounds, that the "whatness" of things as we experience them cannot be "out there" in the world, that things themselves, outside of their relation to us, cannot be hot or cold, sweet or sour, long or short, hard or soft, fast or slow, present or not present, same or different. Indeed, the most basic characteristic of all we see—that of "being an object present to be observed, in contrast to the observer"—is itself not a given fact intrinsic to the object. All of these characteristics of things, including presence as an object to be encountered itself, are relative to an observer; our apprehension of the world is entirely relative to our own perceptual apparatus and conceptual habituations. It is we who carve up the world one way or another, attributing sameness to this part and difference to that part. Without knowing where one "thing" starts and another "thing" ends, there can be no "simple facts" about what is what. Without this act of carving performed by some observer, the world is an uncarved continuum with no isolable characteristics at all. As the great Tiantai master Zhanran says, things *themselves* never declare that they are "the same as" or "different from" one another.[7]

EMPTINESS 1.0: It is important to realize that this means we have no way at all of concretely imagining or conceiving this external world as such in the absence of our processing of it. We might say, instead, that it is perfectly featureless. So purely as a first step, for the moment, it is a useful expedient to think of this as one big undivided totality. This insight is not a monopoly of Buddhists; in fact, it stands at the foundation of the modern scientific worldview as far back as Galileo, and a similar idea appears in Descartes and in Locke, who presented the idea most systematically. In those days it was noticed that some qualities of things seem to be completely dependent on observer—color, sound, smell,

taste, and so on. They had to do with the impact of a thing on some set of sense organs. These were sometimes called "secondary" qualities. But other qualities, it was thought, were truly independent of an observer, which they called "primary" qualities. These tended to be quantifiable things like solidity, extension, motion, number, and figure.

This idea was used for entirely different purposes in Western philosophy, of course; it was meant to divide out the objective from the subjective so that quantitative scientific investigation could find its proper object. But even the "primary" qualities, which were supposed to be independent of an observer, were gradually problematized. Further reflection tended to erode the confidence in their true independence, because, as Berkeley later pointed out, they cannot be conceived entirely independently of the "secondary" qualities.[8] And Kant, though rejecting the Berkeleyan idealism, argues instead that all the forms and categories by which any actual identifiable content is given to the experienced world can be shown to be the work of our own innate mental structures rather than the thing in itself;[9] we cannot have derived them from experience, but we also necessarily experience the world that way. They are the necessary conditions for experience as such.

We may think that what we experience, while not the whole truth, is at least a partial truth. When I see the white cup, I may admit that I am seeing only a small part of all that could be seen there, but nonetheless what I am seeing is part of what is really there. I am seeing the tip of an iceberg. But as we have seen, what this "tip" is does not remain the same tip regardless of which kind of unseen iceberg it is the tip of. Its identity is changed by the whole of which it is a part. I am just seeing O. But is the rest of the totality, which I don't see, a series of numbers or a series of letters? Without knowing that, I cannot know what I am seeing, and I cannot say that at least I know that I am seeing the letter that comes between N and P in the alphabet, nor that I am seeing the symbol for zero. Zero and the letter O would be "secondary qualities"; O's figure, its roundness, would be its primary quality. But in truth, I cannot even say that it is "circular," for it may be that when the rest of its totality is revealed, it will turn out to be, say, an oval that is set at an angle, with a thicker rim at the far end, and thus foreshortened to look circular only from our own perspective.

Tiantai meditation, unlike some other Buddhist meditation techniques, does not put any special premium on "emptying" or "stilling" the mind. It does not try to form a wordless, featureless, direct apprehension of the moment, excluding all conceptualizations, all imaginations, all ideas, all thoughts. Indeed, in the Tiantai view, even if one were to remain entirely without views or thoughts, in complete stillness, this would itself be no more than one more mental state, one more constructed and delusory vision of the world. It is an important one! But it is not the truth. So do not linger on this vision of the featureless world as if it were truth. This is where Tiantai parts company with many other Buddhist schools. For this featurelessness is itself still just something you are imagining on the basis of an intellectual view, a delusory discrimination in its own right. But it is essential to hold this (deluded) idea of the featureless world in your (deluded) mind, to contrast to something else that is also in your (deluded) mind: the world of features, attributes, characteristics.

Linger over this vision—this *idea*—of complete non-knowing. Looking at a white cup, remind yourself: "This is not really a cup; this is not really white. I have no idea at all what this is." Thinking about the world, remind yourself: "Whatever I may think is true of the world is *not* true. I don't know anything about what the world is really like. Every single thing I think is true cannot really, ultimately, be true."

Notice, however, that when you say, "Nothing is as it appears, or as it ever may appear," you are imaging something distinct from what appears, something particular that is "other" to everything that appears—a giant blank of featurelessness, empty space perhaps. This is something you are contrasting to the world as it appears. You have two things: the world as it appears, and the world as it really is, which is not like this, not what appears. Hold these two pictures in your mind, one after another. Now hold them next to each other. What do they have in common? What is the shared medium they inhabit that allows you to hold them next to each other and compare them? What distinguishes them? What is the borderline between them?

EMPTINESS 2.0: The world is not a featureless void. The world is also not as it appears nor any possible single way of appearing. The world as a Buddha sees it is, as chapter 16 of the *Lotus Sūtra* says, "neither thus

nor otherwise"[10]—neither "this way" nor any other particular "way." There is no one way the world is, there is no one way any thing is. To be simply "blank" or "featureless" would be "a way it is." So it cannot be blank and featureless either.

But what is it, then? Here again we take up the meaning of Emptiness in Tiantai; not featureless blankness, but *ambiguity*. What is illusory is not that there is something there or even that there are differences in the world. What is illusory is that there are distinct things that are *one way or another,* definitively. In reality, everything can be seen in the way it appears and *also always in at least one other way*. Since it can always be seen in at least one other way, it can be seen in *infinite ways*. Outside of these infinite ways of seeing, however, there is no "it." These ways of seeing it are not added to the one way—the one way of seeing it—that is really it. There is no privileged perspective on it that reveals the "real" qualities it has, as opposed to the other, "distorted" appearances. Appearing with certain features and attributes is one way it appears. Imagined as actually being featureless is another way it appears. Neither is more true than the other.

Nor does this ambiguity mean vagueness or blurriness. Sometimes romanticist or pietistic enemies of instrumental reason or technology or intellectualism (including many self-identifying Buddhists) have the idea that reality itself is something fluid, goopy, muddy, and soft-edged, with everything running and dripping into other things through gradual admixture. They believe that this complex but unmanageable mush is simplified down into rigid concrete, sharply bordered things by our distorting perception, informed by our language of discrete nouns and our rigid reasoning, which is obsessed by, and only recognizes, clear and distinct ideas. That is not the position we are taking here. We recognize "making distinctions" as characteristic precisely of mind, what mind does, but we cannot for this reason contrast this to some non-distinct "other" thing, which would have to be *distinct* from the distinction-making process of mind, standing outside it. Tiantai regards this as a blind alley: we can never transcend the distorting activity of distinction-making mind by imagining instead some kind of blurriness or goopiness that is beyond or outside mind, for this is just more of the same, more "mind," more distinctions. Rather, we must work from within the mind and its

distinctions as something utterly inescapable, utterly omnipresent, utterly unsurpassable, and yet for that very reason always self-surpassing from within. This is possible because the ambiguity indicated by Emptiness in Tiantai thought is not only something that coexists with the sharp boundaries made by mental distinctions; it is also itself a consequence of them, and they of it: the two are coextensive, alternate names for the same fact. This is what is meant by the Three Truths: distinctness (provisional positing, local coherence) is precisely ambiguity (Emptiness, global incoherence), and the Center is the insight into their precise reversibility, that each entails the other, that in fact they are really just synonyms for one another.

For if we imagine blurry objects, these objects and their blurriness are really no less sharp and distinct, in the relevant sense, than hard-edged solid objects. What we mean by "sharp" and "distinct" is just what we mean by "thinghood" as such: *mutual exclusivity*. What do we mean when we say something "is there"? We mean, at the very least, that it excludes whatever it is not, and this is all it means for it to be clearly and distinctly itself. This concept applies as much to a quality or state, at any level of abstraction, as it does to a putative object. Does the state "blurriness" exist? If so, it is separated by a sharp boundary (physically and/or conceptually) from "non-blurriness." Does the state "gradual admixture" exist? If so, it is separated by a sharp boundary from the state of "total separation." Without distinctness, without a clear separation from what is not it, it is not there, whether we are talking about a physical object or a particular state of an object or an abstract mental concept. For it to be there at all, to be definitely this thing rather than another, is just what we mean by its distinctness, its borderedness. It is the borders of things that disambiguate them, that make them definitely this or definitely that. If these borders are loose and fuzzy, the identity and extent of the thing in question is proportionately loose and fuzzy (and the qualities of looseness and fuzziness themselves are, on the contrary, perfectly definite and distinct, opposed to and exclusive of the qualities of "being rigorously defined" and "sharp divisions"). A country with no borders has no territory.

Take a few minutes right now to notice the "distinctness" of everything you see, even the distinctness of states and qualities, even of the

qualities of indistinctness and indefiniteness. Here is this cup. Notice the distinctness of the cup, the way it is clearly separate from its environment, from what is not-cup. Notice the edges, the boundaries, the outlines of this cup, of this table, of the space described between them. Now try it with sounds. See where they begin and end, notice the clear delineation of inside versus outside, of its presence versus its absence. Try it now for emotions. You say you know that you feel something. You feel, you say, "anger." Try to find the borderlines of this anger, where it begins and ends. Find where it borders other emotional states: calmness, indifference, joy. To be anger it must be different from these other states. To be different from them it must have some boundary that separates it from them.

The distinctness of anger is the angerness of anger, its reality as anger and nothing else. The distinctness of the cup is the cupness of the cup, its reality as a cup and nothing else. The distinctness of a thought, a sound, a memory, a texture, a smell, a flavor—that is the thoughtness, the soundness, the memoryness, the textureness, the smellness, the flavorness. Distinctness is reality: realness is distinctness.

Wherever you look, wherever you direct your thoughts, whatever you feel, notice the distinctness. The distinctness is the being of all things. Without distinctness those things are not there, they are not disambiguated, there are no particular things. Wherever you look in the world, you will see distinctness and nothing but distinctness. The world is made of distinctness.

Direct your mind to the time before you were born. If this thought is an experience, it must have some distinctness, distinctness of being an image of that time rather than any other. Notice this distinctness, this clarity, the unambiguousness. Direct your mind to the thought of the time after you die. Notice its distinctness. Notice in-between states, wavering states, like boredom: notice that boredom has its own distinctness as boredom, standing out against the background of non-boredom (excitement, joy, sorrow).

Spend some time just noticing distinctness everywhere. Notice that it is coextensive with reality. Notice that there is absolutely nothing you can imagine, feel, think, see, hear, touch, or smell that lacks this distinctness, that is not in every detail distinctness. To "be there" at all is to

be distinct. This distinctness is the work of your mind. Where you see distinctness, you are seeing your mind.

Now look at your concept of your mind. Look at your concept of your mind making all of these distinctions. Is it distinct? If not, it is not there, it cannot be doing the work of making distinct, of disambiguating. If it is, then its own distinctness too is the work of itself, of a thought. A thought distinguishes self from world, making both exist, making both, that is, *distinct*. Notice a mood. Is it distinct? If not, it is not there. If so, it is made by you as the maker of distinctions. Notice a *way* of making distinctions. Is it distinct, identifiable, distinguishable from other ways of making distinctions? If not, it is not there. If so, it is an artificial construct produced by your mind, by a way of seeing, by a way of thinking.

Emptiness means the world is ontologically ambiguous. Provisional positing means we experience a world where many or most elements do not present themselves as ambiguous at all, where they present themselves as definitively "this" rather than "that," as non-negotiable facts, as disambiguated. Mind is simply the process of disambiguating, of making things real and present to us by making them distinct and mutually exclusive. It is the process of animating and illuminating and presencing a coherent relevant world to us by means of disambiguation into specific distinct identities. Where you see anything, therefore, you are seeing your mind at work. Where you see anything, you are seeing your (deluded) mind. Where you see any reality, that reality—that distinctness—is made by your deluded mind.

You cannot imagine ambiguity in quite the same way you could imagine the blank featurelessness. Just imagining a blur will not do, because that blur is imagined as distinct from something else—that is, from clarity and distinctness. You cannot set up one clear and distinct realm—the ambiguous—against another clear and distinct realm—the unambiguous. Rather, every single thing in both fields is distinct, but all of this distinctness is something filtered down from an infinite ambiguity by a point of view, a perspective, a mental act.

Now examine the interfaces that separate things, the edges between them that make them distinct. Consider these boundaries between things closely. You can apply the intellectual arguments of Emptiness here. The traditional Tiantai meditation manuals like to focus especially

on the temporal aspect. You are having this experience right now—a moment of anger, let's say. Isolate the part of this experience that you were pre-reflexively identifying as the "anger." Not everything in your field of awareness is this feeling of anger. It is accompanied by background states of various levels of distinctness, and other nascent thoughts and feelings, all of which are different from anger, in which the quality of "anger" is not manifest. Furthermore, you have not always been "angry," nor will you always be angry in the future. This experience of anger is impermanent; it had a beginning and it will have an end in time, and even right now it has a boundary separating it from other sensations, where it begins and ends, within the soup of experiences comprising this moment of sentience. That is what makes it a distinct and identifiable experience, anger as opposed to something else.

Think about its beginning. It came from a state of "not being angry"—perhaps the state of hearing yourself being insulted by someone or stubbing your toe. "Insult" is different from "anger," an entirely distinct and different qualitative experience, and yet somehow "insult" causes (or at least conditions) the arising of "anger." Think about the anger arising while still in the anger; feel it as a quality pervading a certain expanse of your conscious life, of your time. How did "anger" arise from "non-anger"? Did the non-anger disappear before the anger arrived? If so, the non-anger could not be the "cause" of the anger, because to do the work of "causing," something must still be there. What has already disappeared can do no causing. But the moment of being insulted or stubbing your toe was a moment of not-yet-anger, right? Yet it has been taken as the cause of the anger. It would seem that the anger *must* have come from "non-anger," because "anger" and "non-anger" are all that exist, according to our ordinary logic, the logic that shapes our ordinary experience. This would still apply even if there were some neutral medium, something that is neither the stubbing of the toe nor the arising of the feeling of anger, that transmits influences between cause and effect. There must be a relationship between the cause (the insult) and the medium, which are "not" each other, which are mutually exclusive to each other, as well as a relationship between the neutral medium and the anger that arises, which is also "not" it. The neutral medium is also, by definition, "non-anger." Whatever was going on before anger arose

must have been some form of "non-anger," so the only possible cause of anger is non-anger. And yet if it were gone when anger arose, it could not have caused the anger.

What is the other alternative? That it was *not* gone when the anger arose. But in that case, anger and non-anger existed *at the same time*. These two mutually contradictory states, anger and non-anger, had to coexist, at least for a moment during the transition. But once again this is forbidden by our ordinary logic: the state of "being angry" can only be defined and experienced as such, as distinct from "not being angry," if it excludes "not being angry." If both are going on at once, then why do we name this "being both angry and not angry" as "anger" instead of "non-anger"? Perhaps you will try to evade this logical paradox by saying, "Okay, *part* of me was experiencing the non-angry cause of anger, and at that time *another part* experienced the arising of anger." But this will not do either, for how do these two "parts" of your experience relate? Once again, they must coexist somewhere and have something in common in order to have a relation, but to do so is logically impossible. Again, you can try to move their coexistence into some neutral third medium that is neither anger nor non-anger—the mind itself, perhaps—but there again the same problem arises: how can the mutually exclusive "neutral" and the "non-neutral" coexist so that one can "occupy" the other, "enclose" the other, or have any relation at all?

Thus we see that the borders we imagine between moments in time are *incoherent*; they do not make sense when investigated closely. But this moment's distinctness, its reality, depends on having unambiguous borders. The moment is really like a floating finger; its outside (past, future) is its inside, and its inside is its outside. In fact it's always both "anger-non-anger" given the locally coherent name "anger" or "non-anger" (or indeed "anger-non-anger") only temporarily, provisionally, within a certain local context. That non-angry insult you heard was all reality, including both the bliss of Buddhahood and the torments of demonic delusion, in the form of "insult." You who heard that insult, your body and mind waiting there to be insulted, are also all of reality, including both the bliss of Buddhahood and the torments of demonic delusion, but in the form of "you." And the experience of anger that arose when these two versions of the entirety of reality came into contact, that was also

all of reality, including both the bliss of Buddhahood and the torments of demonic delusion, but in the form of "anger." Try to feel this: whenever you have any experience, it is the entire multiverse (the subject) encountering the entire multiverse (the object), thereby giving rise to the entire multiverse (the experience).

Now apply the same thing to distinctness, the boundedness, of things in space—your body, this cup, that table. Where does "cup" end and "non-cup" begin? They too need to be contrasted in order to have their own identities. Cup is only cup when held up against non-cup, and for this "holding up against" to occur, the two must coexist in a single experience; the experience of cup must extend beyond cup into the surrounding space. But in that case, cup and non-cup are experienced at once, *as* cup. For cup and non-cup to be contrasted is a *relation* between them. In order to be related, they must coexist—not in a spot of time, as before, but in some medium they have in common, some space that encloses them both, some field in which they can be held together. This field must be nonexclusive of both cup and non-cup; otherwise it could not contain them both without itself being excluded. The mind or the space in which they both appear—how can it be neutral to cup and non-cup and yet coexist with both? "Neutral to cup and non-cup" means "neither cup nor non-cup," which should exclude both cup and non-cup. And yet there still needs to be at least one point where cup and non-cup are both present so that they can be compared, held against each other, considered at once. (You might turn back to chapter 4 to review my discussion of the strangeness of space as the primary symbol of the Buddha-nature.) The point once again is that the boundaries of things in space do not make sense; the distinctness of things is not really possible. All apparently distinct things are floating fingers, always inside one another, always on *both* sides of any assumed borderline.

So none of the world as it appears to you is simply "there." What puts it there as a distinct something, comprised of distinct entities? Again, it is your own disambiguating distinguishing consciousness, which is the indispensable motor of all the whatnesses of the things that you experience. Where you see a world of whatnesses, you are seeing the workings of your own deluded mind. To look at your mind, just look at the world that you know. This differentiated world is itself your deluded mind.

Now that you see distinctness everywhere, apply your imagination, expanding outward. Let the mind drift randomly to any object or state you know about, have heard about, can imagine. Dogs. Mud. Tables. Ancient Rome. The planet Neptune. Include imaginary things: unicorns, Buddhas, demons. Include emotional states: sadness, joy, surprise, terror, boredom.

Be aware of all you know or even know "about." Knowing about something is a way of presencing that something in and as an aspect of your own mind.

You hate that possible future, that memory, that experience, that character trait, that thing, that person. *What you hate* is a mental "object." *Your hatred for it* is a mental "attitude." Include both the "object" and the "attitude" among the "things" your own mind is manifesting. They are parts of a single mental event. Both are aspects of "you."

Scanning your body, waft your awareness from part to part: hand, foot, leg, belly, neck, head. See how your noticing them actualizes them, brings them into awareness, shapes them as distinct objects.

Now extend the same scanning outward into the world—to trees, houses, people you know. See how your awareness actualizes them, animates them, presences them, how each becomes a distinct something, a shape of the wafting smoke of your awareness. One good way to create your own version of the "ten realms" or "ten suchnesses," in a modern and personalized version, is to open any page of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman invokes huge lists, naming one thing after another, affirming everything, expanding the vista of his awareness, simply bringing each thing clearly to mind, one after another. Keep Whitman nearby as a goad to your imagination. Watch each item spring to life, assume its distinctness as one form after another of your wafting awareness. Include your awareness of blank spots, of blurs, of alternate possibilities, of the best and worst, of the most and least like yourself. Be aware of everything. Now be aware of one more thing. Don't forget to include the reduplications, the alternate ways of viewing "the same thing," including both possibles and actuals: it's like this, *and* it's like that; I'm right about this, *and* I'm wrong about this; I'll do this, *and* I'll do that. Include them all as shapes of awareness. Everything imaginable or conceivable is fair game and is among what counts as "world" here, as "mind" here.

Be aware of all this as the function of your own mind: the creation of each "whatness." Where do you find some "whatness"? Wherever you find any "whatness" of any kind, you are finding your mind; wherever you see "whatness," you are seeing "you." What is this "you"?

"Everything is me!" we may exclaim at this point. Let's explore that point of view for now, though we will have reason to go beyond it, even reverse it, in a moment. The key to reaching this experience is to distinguish between the self as *will* (or *desire*) and the self as *awareness*. Our everyday intuition of selfhood depends on dividing the world in accordance with our desires. As modern developmental psychology has pointed out in describing the formation of a sense of self in an infant, whatever accords with our will is identified as self, and whatever contravenes our desires—annoys us, frustrates us, hurts us, obstructs our desires—is felt as "non-self." But our awareness—our very own awareness—includes by definition both what pleases us and what displeases us. If it were not a part of our awareness, after all, it could not displease us. When we begin to see ourselves as our awareness rather than our will, we find that all things are part of our self. Our awareness seems not to be divided into self and nonself; it has no borders that it does not also cross beyond, for to even experience a border as a border is already to pass beyond it. The self as awareness therefore seems to be not really just "my self," the self confined to my personal perspective, my limited body; it extends in all directions, covers the entire field of being, belonging to no one and everyone. It seems to be the unconditioned—Nirvana itself!

This is a common Buddhist and even non-Buddhist consideration, evoking a pleasing semi-mystical intuition. It is perhaps an intuition of this type that underlies the Upanishadic notion that "ātman is Brahman": all things are parts of the true self, the self that is my innermost self. It stands at the beginning of a long series of permutations constituting the intellectual history of Chan or Zen Buddhism. Tiantai uses this same method and the intuition it produces, but to precisely the *opposite* effect, because it vigorously rejects the accuracy of this sense that awareness is unconditioned, that it is not really *my* awareness—my partial, distorted, personal awareness. On the contrary, the awareness that seems to be purified of our biased and selfish desires is in fact completely

conditioned by them. Our awareness is thoroughly saturated with our will and desires. This awareness that covers the entire field of beings is actually completely conditioned, completely dependent on who, where, what, and how we are for how it manifests these beings and even *that* it manifests all of these beings in the field of our awareness. In this way, Tiantai is thus compatible with a thoroughly physical account of consciousness; it is a function of our body being here and now, conditioned in just this way.

And yet awareness does cover every possible state toward which we could have any attitude at all, by definition. The whole point of the "everything is me" meditation is to reveal that even the hated elements, and even the seemingly neutral elements of the world as we know it, even the furniture and scene setting that are so non-me, the world without me against which I define myself, is thoroughly saturated with me-ness—not universal, unconditional selfhood, but with my particular biased, lustful, stupid, half-insane self. Locate *this* selfhood in every element of your awareness. Notice how your personal position, attitude, past, character, and education are actually present in all elements of your experience, in every moment and aspect of awareness. See the way the color of your self infects every single being in your world. Not with shame, not with any intention to correct it, not with a scolding attitude—rather almost with raging pride. If your name is Bob, see the Bobness of the whole world around you, including in the things you hate, the most egregiously non-Bob things. Notice that they look so hateful because you, Bob, hate them so much. Don't bother to think this is a bias; just notice that it is you who is, perhaps justifiably, bringing out the hatefulness of that object. Note how the things you detest, that you define yourself in contrast to, are also colored by precisely this position of yours. Notice that Bob is everywhere in Bob's world, that every moment and every aspect of Bob-awareness is Bobbish, either directly or indirectly, either in the form of itself or in reverse. Notice the Bob-style in the entire play about Bob: in every detail of the setting, the story, the background, see the Bob-relatedness, even if merely in the form of contrast to Bob. Bob knows there are vast expanses of time before he was born and after he dies; Bob knows there are millions of people in the world who don't know he exists; Bob knows that many people

detest everything he stands for. All of these are aspects of Bob, of Bob-as-awareness, which is an extension of Bob-as-desire.

Now, what is this Bobness? Bobness, it turns out, is something that is everywhere and nowhere. Conditional Bobness is what is unconditional! Precisely by succeeding in its project of pervading all possible entities, all characteristics, it loses its own unique characteristic. It is no longer "Bob" as opposed to any "non-Bob." Its success is its crash; its crash is its success. Its local coherence is its global coherence. Its seriousness is its humor. The more you see the outside world, in all of its variation and articulation, in all of its differences, in all of its outsideness, the more you see yourself. And the more you search inside yourself for what is most uniquely and distinctly you, the more you discover the outside world. As one becomes more manifest, so does the other. The more outside you and different from you the world shows itself to be—the more uncontrollable and undigestible and unexpected and unassimilable—the more it is revealing itself to be your own activity. And the more it is your own doing, the more multifariously and distinctly other it is.

"STYLE" AS THE THREE TRUTHS: FULL REALIZATION OF DELUSION AS LIBERATION FROM DELUSION

What, then, is our problem, and what shall we do about it? Let's review. For Buddhism in general, man's spiritual problem is not sin in the sense of, say, disobedience or even alienation from some particular being or state, but rather existential suffering. Suffering per se is a function of conditionality, which is to say, finitude as such. Conditionality means dependence on more than just a single cause (such as a self or an essence); every event is one of many effects arising from the convergence of more than one heterogeneous cause. No single entity, acting alone, can produce an effect. Suffering means "a disparity between what I want and what is the case." It is defined in relation to human desire. This desire is not just for pleasure conceived as some particular object, but rather for the constant *availability* of pleasure, the power to get it when one wants it. The getting is the pleasure, not the object got. It is this power to get what one wants that one really wants behind all apparent objects of desire. But "to have the power to get what one wants whenever one wants it"

means "to be the sole cause of what happens to one." This concept would appear to be unconditional.[11] But it is what would be required if one were to be a "self"—that is, the sole cause of one's own condition—and this idea underpins the commonsensical attempts to end suffering: to become, or to assure oneself that one already is, the sole cause of what one experiences at all times.

However, this is just what is impossible if the finitude (conditionality) of beings is the most relevant fact about them. Hence the only spiritual solution for man can initially be described as the overcoming of conditionality. But this cannot be done by positing some other thing—God, Brahman, substance, the eternal—that is unconditional, as opposed to man, who is conditional. This is because, first, the unconditional as opposed to, contrasted to, the conditional is itself really also conditional. It is "conditioned" by "not" being the conditional, without which condition it would cease to be itself. It has a determinate, finite content, dependent on something not applying or not being the case about it. Also, as long as "this is this and that is that"—each being taken to be only what it is and nothing besides, having a single determinate identity, the existence of, even the relation to or the merging with—the unconditional does not alleviate man's conditionality.

The real problem is the idea that conditionality and unconditionality are seen as mutually exclusive or that finitude is seen as the end of the story for a determinate being. Now, existence *is* finitude, but finitude, it turns out, is local coherence, which is global incoherence. This means the identities of things are not finally fixed; they have "no self," and they always inherently entail their opposites such that X and non-X, to which it is constitutively contrasted, are "non-dual." The real solution is not to try to escape conditionality to reach some other definite condition of "unconditionality" (which would actually still be conditional), but rather to learn to experience the conditionality in the unconditional and the unconditional in the conditions, the twoness in the oneness and the oneness in the twoness.

One might imagine many ways of dealing with the alienated, angst-ridden state of man. The most commonsensical perhaps would be to try to replace it with something else, something better, getting rid of the bad and attaining the good instead; one makes effort to strive toward

an ideal. Another would be to try to show that this alienation is merely apparent and that all the while, underneath it, subsuming it and making it possible, is a better, enlightened, eternal state of state, which need only be remembered and attended in its ineradicable presence to resolve the problem. Tiantai adopts neither of these approaches; rather, it tells us to focus on the biased, alienated, finite, and angst-ridden condition itself and, in a very particular sense, to *more fully actualize* it. Instead of trying to get away from our conditionality and fragile finiteness and its concomitant neuroses, we might say, we are instructed to dwell in them, in fact to *become* them. As Zhili says, "To dwell in them is to be free of them, and fully realized dwelling in them is full freedom from them."[12]

We have seen that Tiantai epistemology holds that each moment of experience is the encounter of two local coherences (a sense organ and a sense object) producing a third local coherence (the arising of a moment of experience). But all three of these local coherences are also globally incoherent and intersubsumptive. This means that in the final analysis each moment is the Total Field of All Phenomena encountering the Total Field of All Phenomena, thereby producing the Total Field of All Phenomena. The subject doing the experiencing is all subjects, all states of mind, all objects; the object is all subjects, all states of mind, all objects; the experience is all subjects, all states of mind, all objects. The split between the subject and the object is simultaneously ineradicable—inherently entailed at each locus—*and* overcome. What we end up with is not an undifferentiated continuum, where there is no subject and object, but rather subject-object faced with subject-object. The split is everywhere, but in this way it is also overcome in a distinctively Tiantai way, because to the extent that the subject-object contrast is on *both* sides of the apparent contrast, there is no contrast between them. Each is everywhere, and the division is everywhere, but is also everywhere only as sublated; it too is locally coherent, globally incoherent, and all-pervasive. Subject and object are one because each is really the split "subject-object," which thus faces only itself on the other side of the divide. And yet the divide is internal to it.[13] Finitude is thus an ineradicable, universal condition, and it is the realization of this paradox that forms the hub of Tiantai praxis.

The process described in Tiantai meditation is simply to see oneself as finite, to make one's finitude explicit, and in so doing to experience its global incoherence and hence the universality of one's particular form of finitude, its intersubsumption, its all-pervasion as all-pervadedness. It is the universalization of the sense of incompleteness, of wrongness, of the unease of evil, anxiety, guilt, melancholia, finitude, that both preserves and overcomes it. The Tiantai meditation steps are as follows:

1. Become acutely aware of this sense of incompleteness, inadequacy, wrongness, of not seeing the whole truth and of necessarily always getting everything wrong. Accept this sense and develop the capability of recognizing it clearly in all of its subtle manifestations, to feel it intensely and precisely as this qualitative wrongness, infecting even the apparently good and pleasant things that circumscribe it and in contrast to which it is defined. (The role of repentance rituals in traditional Tiantai, combined with classical mindfulness contemplations and doctrinal applications, speaks to this need.[14])

2. Investigate what this feeling of incompleteness feels like, what it is to feel this feeling. For it to exist in the way presumed in our preconscious emotional grasp of it—as just this and nothing besides—is what makes this suffering objectionable to us. But for it to be experienced this way is for it to be contrasted to something, to be distinct, to be bounded, non-all, finite, girded about by what is not-it. That sense of the edges of the feeling, the interface with its opposite, is sought. If the opposite feeling is not presently felt, this feeling cannot be felt; if the opposite feeling is felt, it is in some sense internal to this feeling. Incompleteness must itself be incomplete (non-all) in order to be incompleteness.

3. Examine this interface between the feeling of incompleteness and what lies beyond it. Does it lie on one side or the other? Is it an overlapping of two mutually exclusive qualitative feelings? None of these alternatives is ultimately coherent, although the appearance of the feeling depends on their being locally coherent. But they cannot stand up to close attention, reconsideration, recontextualization, understanding of, and meditation upon this interface.

This feeling of limitedness and wrongness is thus seen to be dependent on a certain kind of narrowing of awareness, a limitation of the horizon of relevances, in order to make one's deluded mind appear as a

determinate and mutually exclusive entity. When awareness is opened up to allow further contexts to come into play, the meaning and felt identity of this sensation alters. In itself it has no certain identity; it is ontologically ambiguous (globally incoherent, empty). This means that just by being itself, this limited biased wrongness is equally readable as all other possible local coherences, pervading and pervaded by them all (intersubsumption). Among these coherences, most importantly, is the opposite state. When seen merely as mutually exclusive local coherences, each of these states—for example, the defining motivating contrast of all our experience, suffering versus non-suffering—is considered a mere part of a larger whole, namely, the totality of suffering and non-suffering. But seen as also globally incoherent and intersubsumptive, each part subsumes the whole; suffering is "suffering/non-suffering," and non-suffering is also "suffering/non-suffering." Any one point subsumes all states. Thus the full realization of the being of this feeling of wrongness is also the overcoming of the feeling of wrongness, recontextualizing itself to reveal that it is always also a manifestation of freedom and immutable rightness, precisely by being the feeling of qualitative wrongness, not by evading this feeling. It is like the "funny-unfunny" deadpan setup to a joke, funny just because it is so unfunny.

More precisely, Tiantai meditation focuses not on the resulting state of feeling, but on the real source of this feeling: the habitual narrowing of consciousness noted above. This process of one-sided narrowing is the evil of evils, the suffering of sufferings, and it is this that serves as the object of contemplation. The solution comes when we can fully realize this compulsive spasm of consciousness that insists on parsing and framing in only one way, grasping at and separating out separate, mutually exclusive entities, when we can investigate *its* interface with the opposite state (i.e., the intersubsumptive awareness of a Buddha that sees oneness in twoness and twoness in oneness). It is itself locally coherent as a neurotic compulsive spasm, hence also globally incoherent, hence also intersubsumptive with the awareness of intersubsumption. The awareness of intersubsumption is appearing *as* this neurotic compulsive spasm of consciousness.

Here I would venture to describe the actual experience of this kind of psychological exercise in terms of an unorthodox simile. Imagine

that you are composing an autobiographical novel bent on depicting yourself in the most unflattering possible light, a running narrative of yourself as a foolish, lazy, selfish, cowardly, greedy, spiteful, morally bankrupt, biased, confused, alienated, lonely, and pathetic individual struggling to make his way in the world. In doing so, you must also describe this loathsome character's environment, how he interacts with it, what it appears as to him. The entire world and each specific entity is seen as a function of this miscreant fool's perception, aspects of his Lebenswelt, saturated with his delusions and appearing in the forms that are relevant to his particular greeds, hatreds, and delusions. All events, history, conditions, and characteristics of the world would be included in this account, but in the peculiar distorted form that speaks to the avarice and malevolence of this central character. The sun and the sky are his sun and sky—annoyances to him, objects of his curses, ingratitude, and aesthetic neglect. The suffering of others is there too, but only as aspects of his own suffering, competing for limited ameliorations or as triggers to his self-pity or opportunities to exploit. Great events may come and go in the background, but coming through to his consciousness only to the extent that they impact on his own narrow preoccupations. In this way his delusion is seen to pervade the world.

This sad existential condition is analogous to the situation of our ordinary everyday lives as usually lived. The process of noting and transcribing this sad existential condition into a self-conscious narrative is analogous to Tiantai meditation. In the course of this noting and transcription, an interesting transformation occurs, with a by-now-familiar threefold structure:

1. Provisional positing: On the one hand, nothing is changed; on the contrary, everything is noted with greater vividness and precision than in the normal living through of this kind of life. The detailed written description of this condition is not a moving away from it to some idealized condition of liberation, but rather a moving into it, an intensification of it. One might even say that it becomes *more itself* in this process, more fully realized and explicitly what it is: more distinctly selfish, lazy, alienated, and so on.

2. Emptiness: But at the same time, by virtue of this very fact, a kind of transformation occurs. First, it has been "emptied"—that is, a

distance and framing have been established, a kind of de-realizing that is simultaneously a hyper-realization; it becomes "fictionalized," as it were. Simply by framing it, or making explicit the fact that it is framed, the possibility of *reframing* it has been revealed. Seeing the world explicitly *as* a function of the perverted consciousness of the protagonist simultaneously reveals it to be capable of being seen *otherwise*, seen *as* something else. Its Emptiness, or ontological ambiguity, has been disclosed just by seeing illusion *as* illusion rather than by dispelling the illusion.

3. The Center: But at the same time, this perverted stream of experience becomes a recognizable *style of being*, which is applicable not only to the specific incidents that happen to occur in the narrative but also, in principle, to any event that might occur. Once one grasps this style of being, an infinite number of incidents can be used to express it.

"Style," in fact, is a very useful way of thinking about the Tiantai Three Truths. Imagine a painting of a vase by van Gogh. It is just a vase, specifically a vase, distinctly a vase, and not a non-vase. This is provisional positing, conventional truth, local coherence. But it is not really a vase; it is a painting of a vase, it is also just a bunch of brushstrokes, it is framed and put forward as a vase, a faux vase. This is Emptiness, global incoherence. But this fakeness of the vase does not make it less of a vase; in fact, it makes it *more* of a vase, a more paradigmatic vase than a real vase. It captures the essence of vase, precisely in its non-realistic, van Gogh–ish style, much more vividly and forcefully than a random, unframed, "real" vase can. This is the Center, the ultimate reality of vaseness produced by the convergence of "vase" (provisional positing, conventional truth) and "painted non-vase" (Emptiness). And this particular form of vaseness comes with a *style*: the van Gogh style of vase. Now, this quality, this style, can be instantiated not only in a vase but also in any other thing. Once one has grasped, through the painting, how a vase instantiates the van Gogh style, one can extend that style to anything else: van Gogh clouds, stars, flowers, haystacks. The essence of vase as instantiating the van Gogh style now interpervades the essence of clouds, stars, flowers, haystacks. It is all things, but in this specific style—not the sole all-unifying substance, but one of infinite sole all-unifying substances, because every style is likewise expressed,

once grasped, as the whole of reality. Knowing this as an all-pervasive style reveals the co-presence of infinitely other, equally all-pervasive styles. This is the Center.

Think of a stylistically distinct filmmaker—for example, the Coen brothers. Here is *Fargo*, a specific tale about specific Minnesota characters. The limited, particular specificity of these characters is conventional truth, local coherence. But they are fictional, mere images on film, within an artificial frame: Emptiness. They are really equally actors and flickering lights—that is, they are non-Minnesotans. But precisely because this specificity is this negation, because these specific Minnesotans are non-Minnesotans, the style of the Coen brothers pervades their every action and word. It can now extend beyond the borders of the film. Walking out of the theater, one can indeed begin to see everything as an instantiation of a Coen brothers "type" of moment; a Coen brothers "feel" seems to pervade all things. In this way the Minnesotans and your present life intersubsume; each item pervades all other particulars. Now imagine a Coen brothers biopic about van Gogh, pervading van Gogh's style with the Coen brothers' style. Since that style can be expressed in anything, it can also be expressed in the way they film van Gogh's paintings. Now imagine van Gogh's poster for a Coen brothers movie. Since that style can be expressed in anything, it is also fully present in the way he paints a scene from their movie. Each pervades the other and in doing so manifests an alternate style of all-pervasion.

Going back to our morally bankrupt protagonist, then, one can imagine any event at all as another instantiation of this pathetic protagonist's view of the world; anything and everything can fit into this style. This style is now not a merely finite entity, but a flavor, a characteristic taste that can be expressed "as" any concrete particular and "as which" any concrete particular can be expressed. It is at once a particular something—this pathetic alienated style of being—and an all-pervasive category applicable to all particular somethings. But to be all-pervasive is also to lose the immediate character as a fixed, ontologically unambiguous, simply located entity. Since it is the whole of existence, all entities without exception, there is no longer anything outside of itself with which it can be contrasted and that could thus fix its identity as this characteristic rather than another. In becoming all-pervasive it

is also emptied out, overcome, robbed of its original determinacy. To be a "this" is to be the all, which is also to be nothing in particular. It is intersubsumptive.

The Tiantai doctrine of intersubsumption thus holds that a certain disruptive rogue element is introduced in the process of subsumption. For Tiantai, coherence is always simultaneously incoherence; the full achievement of a readable coherence always brings with it its own overturning. Local coherence is global incoherence; determinateness is indeterminateness. Its full integration of othernesses is at the same time its subordination to those othernesses. It is indeed the very same procedure that manifests both of these aspects; making itself fully real is at the same time making itself ambiguous. Hence, to return to our example of the loathsome protagonist, when an act of kindness appears subsumed into the selfish worldview of our protagonist, it is just one more instance of selfishness, a cunning bit of cynical window-dressing. But once the selfishness itself is made all-pervasive, and thus devoid of its power to definitively determine the entities it subsumes, this act of kindness begins to reveal other aspects of itself that destabilize the original reading of it as a deceptive form of selfishness. There is always, constitutively "more to it"; the overflow of its original determination infects the original subsumer (selfishness, greed) so that subsumption becomes intersubsumption. Liberation appears disguised as suffering finitude, just as suffering finitude had appeared disguised as liberation. The presence of deviltry, upon examination, is not limitable to any one simple location. It pervades and suffuses, is findable in, all conceivable times, places, and states. All the world is deviltry. Hence Buddhahood is also a kind of deviltry. But the presence of Buddhahood makes all the world Buddhahood. This reveals deviltry itself to be a kind of Buddhahood.

What we have just discussed shows us the structure of Tiantai practice in a nutshell. An extra context is added to the normal angst-ridden state of neurotic consciousness. That extra context is Tiantai Buddhist doctrine and contemplation. The neurotic consciousness is not replaced by it, but supplemented by it. As a result of this supplementation, the neurotic consciousness is more fully realized, totally actualized, becomes more explicitly itself than it was before this supplementary

context. As a result, it is also overcome as a simply located state, manifesting instead as a universal principle—indeed as the source, meaning, purpose, and secret identity of all possible entities—the universal category into which all are subsumed. As such, it is unconditional in, as, its very conditionality. It becomes more itself than before, less itself than before, and more completely everything else besides itself, and these are three names for the exact same process. One dwells in it fully, and hence one is free in it, as it, and from it, fully.

AWARENESS OF MENTATION AND THE FREEZE-FRAME METHOD

Zhiyi more technically describes this key form of Tiantai meditation as a constant awareness of the *process* of mentation itself, which is then seen to be inseparable from the *content* of mentation, which is found to include every possible characteristic of every possible world. This is something that can be practiced at all times and places. Zhiyi identifies this practice as "being fully conscious and aware of the directed application of mentation"; the practitioner is to "reverse the direction" of his awareness to examine the process of attention itself, which is to be regarded as a temporally arising and perishing function. This function plays the decisive role in disambiguating and manifesting a world of distinct experienced objects. This settled, fully articulated world of separate things, the totality of objects that I regard as objective reality, is normally regarded as separated from my subjectivity, but this world of definite objects never exists apart from this process of mentation, as seen above. Each moment of this attention or mentation turns out, upon this close examination during the meditation process, to be (1) isolated and without overlap from other moments; (2) coming from nowhere, going nowhere, all alone in the universe; and (3) inclusive of all the other things it seems at first to exclude. This sounds amazing and paradoxical, but it is exactly what we can experience directly by noticing our process of mentation at any moment.

Zhiyi tells us that the mental activity of attention is singled out for contemplation from all the other types of mental activity, contents, and states, for a specific reason:

> When we examine the source of all experienced phenomena, we find they are all produced by our attention. Thus we speak of this process, initially, as "awareness of attention." Now, the awareness that arises in the face of some object, distinguishing us from inanimate beings, is called *mind* (*xin* 心). The subsequent mental process that makes calculations and comparisons to discern the object as distinct from oneself and from other objects (*chouliangfenbie* 籌量分別) is called *attention* (*yi* 意). The final state of distinct objects fully discerned is called *consciousness* (*shi* 識). But to make hard-and-fast distinctions of this kind between these three mental states is to fall into deluded views, not what we mean by real awareness. *Awareness* of this intention means to realize that within *mind* intention and consciousness are never exactly present as such but also never totally absent; that within *intention* mind and consciousness are never exactly present as such but also never totally absent; that within *consciousness* mind and intention as such are never exactly present but are also never totally absent. Mind, intention, and consciousness are not one and the same, and thus they are given three distinct names. But they are not really three separate entities, so we speak of them as aspects of a single nature. . . . In the end we can find no definitive sameness or difference among them. Hence when we contemplate intention alone, it already includes mind and consciousness—and indeed, it already includes *all experienceable phenomena without exception*. Thus merely by overcoming the delusion of our own attention, we completely destroy all other compulsions and constraints.[15]

In other words, I turn my awareness away from the seemingly objective world of distinct objects and direct it instead to my own mind—that is, first of all, to this entire system of fully distinct items itself, but now regarded explicitly as aspects of my experience; in other words, as "consciousness," as the world of all the differentiated objects discerned by a *completed* act of disambiguating discernment. These present themselves as the *objects* of consciousness, but, as known, they are still a part of the system of consciousness. Further than this, Zhiyi says, I am to focus on intention as the *process* of mentation, of making calculations, comparisons, divisions, discernments, of sorting things out. This also includes this same entire content of "consciousness," not as already completed, but rather always in the *process* of being completed. It also includes my bare awareness (*xin*, mind), my sense of rudimentary difference from objects, as a sentient rather than insentient being. But I am to focus on the *middle term* of these three, *between* a bare faculty of pure subjectivity per se (mindedness or sentience as such) and fully completed experienced world of distinct objects, though always implying

both. I focus on the process of making sense of things, of making my way in a world.

So I am to look around my world, feeling my present experience *in between knower and known (mind and world) and in between past and future*. This is a way of accentuating both my spatial and my temporal finiteness, my in-between-ness, my presence as girded about on all sides by othernesses. I am to learn to notice my present moment of experience as a kind of island surrounded by pastness and futureness. In another sense, my present experience is an island sandwiched between a sensitive mental organ and a world of distinct perceivable objects. Feel that pastness and futureness circumscribing the present, feel that sensitive body and insensate world sandwiching your awareness. I am this present moment of mentation girded by a before and an after. That is, each experience is to be felt as between a past moment, when the present moment of attentive mentation is "not-yet" (*weinian* 未念), and a future moment, when it is "already gone" (*nianyi* 念已). Even when I am noticing a constant object—those curtains, for example—I am to focus not on the object itself (a feature of "consciousness," fully completed differentiation into distinct objects), but on my process of noticing it as something that *has a beginning in time*. That is, I am not thinking about the production of the curtains as objects themselves—the design, the placing of the order, the curtain factory, the procurement of the textiles, the shipping and sales procedures, and so on—but only the production of my present noticing of those curtains. I am to attend to the *arising* of the present qualia, to see them explicitly as experiences, and thus as temporal, as having a beginning.

But just as my process of attention implies and includes self and world (i.e., as Zhiyi says that *yi* 意 implies *xin* 心 and *shi* 識), the present moment of attention implies and includes past and future. The present is surrounded by past and future, but it is also itself temporal, has a duration, a strum through time, without which it has no content. This means it has first part and a second part; past and future are internal to it. If it is instantaneous it can have no specific content, but if it is not instantaneous it is not merely the present; it is further divisible into pasts and futures. As experienced, the allegedly external past and external future also cannot really be external to this present moment. This, however,

makes any "realist" account of the present as either the same as or different from anything else—that is, as simply finite—incoherent. The exhaustive and causally inflected account favored by Zhiyi is expressed in a more directly phenomenological way in the *Suiziyi* of Zhiyi's teacher, Huisi:

> If the present state of mind arises independently of a previous state of mind that is completely gone, these two states of mind should know nothing of each other. It cannot be that a single state of mind, as a genuinely single thing, could know itself, for a truly single state of mind cannot know itself, just as a fingertip cannot touch itself. If you take the mind to have no distinction between earlier and later, then you have fallen into the erroneous view of "eternalism"; but if you take the prior and subsequent states of mind as genuinely different, mutually exclusive, then you have fallen into the erroneous view of "annihiliationism."[16]

That is, the present state of mind, to be experienced at all, must experience itself as present, which means it must be aware of itself as *different from a prior state*, as "new." To be experienced as present is to be experienced as different from a past state. To have a beginning means to be conditional; it means that it must be caused by something in particular. And if it did not have a beginning, it could not be experienced—as a constant tone would never be noticed, as fish don't know what "water" is. That is, to be aware of my present experience is to be aware of it as having a beginning, which means being aware of it against a past that precedes that beginning, being aware of it as differing from a past. But to be aware of being different from a past state of mind requires that it is at least *aware* of that past state of mind. To be aware of something is to have it present in present awareness, in the present state of mind. To be present at all as an experience, then, requires a continued presence of the experience of the past, or pastness, in the present state of mind. But this is incoherent and impossible, because past and present are, by definition, mutually exclusive. If the past is present in the present, it is not past. But by hypothesis this means that the present cannot be present, since it requires the presence of the past. The past cannot be absent from the present, but it cannot be present in the present either.

This is a novel extension of the traditional Buddhist practice of contemplating *impermanence* and *momentariness*. I am to attend first to the beginning and end of each experience, to its arising and its perishing,

then to the mystery of its transition from and to otherness, with special attention to the interface between itself and what is not itself. Note that it is impossible to notice the content that arises and perishes apart from the process of arising and perishing, and likewise it is impossible to notice the process of arising and perishing apart from the content that is arising and perishing, because "some relation to otherness" is inherent to the idea of arising and perishing. In the "spatial" register, it is similarly impossible to notice a static object without noticing anything other than that object: the space that excludes it, the causes that are other than it, the contrasting states outside it. The exact same argument can thus be applied to mind and its alleged boundaries with its non-mental object. The non-mental object cannot be absent from mentation, and yet it cannot be co-present with mentation either if the two are defined as mutually exclusive, which they must be, to count as actual entities at all, as we saw at length above. The same argument is also applied conceptually to any content of consciousness and whatever is not that content: if I am perceiving whiteness, what is its relation with what it excludes—for example, blackness?

What is revealed in the case of awareness of the process of mentation is the impossible yet necessary presence of pastness and futureness in the present moment. We see here the collapse of the distinction between *instantaneousness* and *duration*. Hence Zhiyi sums up the goal of this practice as follows: "The practitioner reflects back to examine the arising of all of his mental states and all the mental objects in them, and finds no movement or change there, no source, no end, nowhere it comes from and nowhere it goes to."[17] This is because each instant of experience is a total world of all time; what appears to be a past or future limiting and excluding this moment is actually already necessarily internal to it. In a sense it is really just *more of* this moment, a further articulation of what was already present in the initially vague form of "futureness per se." It doesn't go from anywhere to anywhere, and in that sense it is unmoving and unchanging. Instantaneous moments already include duration just as oneness already includes manyness. To appear as one is already to appear as many. To appear as a present is already to appear as a past-present-future and, with that, as intrinsic to those very qualities of pastness and presentness and futureness, as internally including the

alleged movement from past to present to future. I look at each experience as an instantaneous moment, a flash of experience floating like an island in an infinity of past and present. And then I notice that the infinity is part of the flash and that the entire movement is internal to the instantaneous moment. Even the flashing, the arising and perishing, is internal to whatever was already there prior to it. To look at the present is to also see the past and future, just as to look at the mind is to also see the world. The moments of time intersubsume as the mind and its world intersubsume.

More specifically, Zhiyi tells us four crucial things about the process of attention, or *yi*: (1) it is constantly moving and exists only by moving; the four temporal phases of not-yet, about-to, during, and gone are its most identifiable and inalienable marks; (2) it is the source of its diverse perceptions and actions; all are "produced" by the process in the sense that it is what allows them to manifest as such, disambiguating and illuminating them as particular distinct objects; (3) it seems to be unitary in contrast to this diversity of distinct objects in the world of experience that the process produces; and (4) these objects are produced by the process in such a way as to be inseparable from it, connected to it, dependent on it, not the kind of production that allows them as to assume an independent existence outside of it. As soon as the act of mentation is over, its productions are gone. It is their "immanent cause," to borrow Spinoza's term:[18] they cannot be separated from it for even an instant and still persist. When the light goes out, all the objects vanish. In this sense we might prefer to say, as later Tiantai tradition does, they are "transformations of it" (*bian* 變) rather than merely "productions of it" (*zao* 造).

We need a concrete image by which to grasp this sort of relation: (1) constant motion functioning as a source that (2) constantly produces diverse forms and shapes (3) in contrast to which it appears to be unitary but that are (4) always inseparable from that source. We have already compared the action of mind to the bulb of a movie projector or the power source of a machine, animating and actualizing and differentiating contents through its actions. But to take in all the features of mentation cited by Zhiyi, a better approximation might be a fountain: a single point of continual spurting water taking the shape of various billows

and waves and frothing bubbles, all of which vanish immediately if the motion stops. The world of experience is this gushing plume, composed of and animated and presenced by this single sustaining activity, gone as soon as it stops. Indeed, the spouting plume just is the activity of the fountainhead itself. The bubbles and froth are the same water and the same indivisible motion as the motion and water at the source; they are not two different things. Think of your process of mentation or attention as a fountain spurting forth the contents of your world and in that way constantly being and sustaining those contents. If the source is made of vinegar, so are the contents. If the source is agitated, so are the contents. If the source is slowed down, so are the contents. If the source is stopped, so are the contents. Indeed, since the source and the contents are ultimately not two separate things, whatever is true of the source will be true of the contents. And yet it is only source as opposed to product in being in some way different from them. This is the heart of the problem.

Thus it is that after establishing mentation as an immanent, sustaining, co-substantial "source" of all experiences in this way, Zhiyi goes on to show that this mentation, the source, is empty; it does not really exist as a distinct, mutually exclusive entity. There is no real distinct source of all experiences. Mental intention appears as mental intention—"you" as opposed to "the world of objects experienced"—only in being active, productive, unitary, and sustaining of its creations. Yet it turns out not to be active, not to be causative, not to be unitary, and not to be the sustainer, because it is now seen to be inseparable from these productions, co-substantial from all othernesses against which it is experienceable in this way. No coherent boundary between them and it can be found. You cannot draw a line between your perceiving and what it perceives. If they were really separate, they could have no contact or overlap, and thus perception could not take place. You cannot draw a line between the producer and the produced, between the one and the many, the sustainer and the sustained, for just the same reason. If they were really distinct, really separate, as they need to be in order to just "be" what they claim to be, they could not have the relationship that allows one to affect the other, of producing, unifying, sustaining, even as serving to determine the other as "not" itself.

The process of meditation is simply to first become aware of yourself as subject in contrast to object, then to see how all objects of experience without exception are produced and sustained by your activity as subject, and then to search for the specific identity of this subjectivity, how it differs from the passive multiplicity of objects that it allegedly "is not" but that it merely produces and sustains through its sole activity, or that stand apart from it as its causes, effects, or contrasts. One then finds that the two are inseparable bilaterally, that no boundary between them can exist, that it is impossible to identify anything, or any part or bit of any thing, in the entire field of experience as either subject exclusively or object exclusively. Instead, each and every bit of experience fails to be exclusively unitary rather than diverse, to be exclusively active rather than passive, to be exclusively sustaining and including rather than sustained or included, to be exclusively cause rather than caused, or to be exclusively caused rather than cause. Since upon examination none of the boundaries that define these qualities against each other are unambiguously real, each of these qualities is itself a "floating finger" encapsulating and composed of the totality of other floating fingers. Thus all of these qualities are found equally everywhere in the field. Each sight and smell is equally the active and unifying creator and sustainer of the entire field of all phenomena in its own deludedly idiosyncratic way, thereby also including your own initial subjecthood.

This process thus begins by noticing acutely the distinction between subject and object, the quality of being subject rather than object—in other words, being in the position of the producer, sustainer, includer, action, and oneness as opposed to produced, sustained, included, passive, and diverse: experience the "producerness," "sustainerness," "includerness," "activeness," and "oneness" as what it feels like to be the subject rather than the object in this field of experience. Then note that the object is presented to our experience as entirely dependent upon, even subsumed in, the subject, as the plume of the fountain into the activity of its spout. But then we go further by noting that the boundaries between subject and object—between producer and produced, sustainer and sustained, includer and included, moving and still, one and many—cannot be unpacked in any coherent way. The "Emptiness" demonstration amounts to saying that the thing in question—in this case, this single

moment of actively discerning productive mentation, the spurting fountain—is not separable from its antecedents and consequences nor from its surrounding contrasts. Those things that seemed to limit it—causes, objects, prior states, future states, possible states, contrasting states—are found, via the Emptiness analysis, to be inseparable from it at every point, saturating it everywhere, internal to its own definition, which is why as a separate thing it is said to "never arise" as such.

This also goes for its abstract qualities of "oneness," "action," "includer," and "producer" as opposed to "diversity," "stillness," "included," and "produced." For it to be there as a specific thing with these specific qualities requires contrast to what it is not, to other qualities; the contrast depends on the boundary, but the boundary cannot be located. So experiencing the field of experience as a total "oneness" of all experience subsumed into the moving unitary producer and sustainer is equivalent to the "noneness" of the latter, to the unfindability of anything that is the moving unitary producer and sustainer as opposed to anything else. When any experience is seen to be all-inclusive and exceptionless (i.e., when all things are included in what is meant by "this moment of experience" so that there is nothing excluded from it), it is seen to be empty. It is thus neither one nor many, both one and many; neither producer nor produced, both producer and produced; neither includer nor included, both includer and included; neither moving nor still, both moving and still.[19]

When the mind as conscious subject is shown to be empty—that is, ambiguous on all of these four counts that were its putative defining marks (i.e., active, unitary, producing, and sustaining its multiple experiences)—all other contrasting entities are simultaneously shown to be empty, to be provisionally posited, to be the Center, and now we can see why. The deconstruction of the "source" mind is also a deconstruction of all its creations. When the mind is negated, all of them are negated. And when it is seen to be thus non-finite and unconditional, they are all seen to be non-finite and unconditional. When it is shown to be the Three Truths, so are all of them. By seeing all things as mind and then seeing mind as empty, provisional, and the Center, we see each thing to be empty, provisional, and the Center. Because mind subsumes all objects, each object subsumes mind. Hence we can say equally, "All

things are mind only," or "All things are matter only"—or indeed, "All things are scent only, all things are sound only, all things are flavor only, all things are touch only,"[20] or, with Zhili, "All things are attachment only, all things are deluded views only,"[21] or "All things are arising only, all things are dwelling only, all things are perishing only, all things are vanished only."[22]

A simple way to experience this idea in meditation is to apply the *freeze-frame method*. To use this method, you must first single out the stream of consciousness, the flow of constant experiences and their ceaseless change. Be aware of the passing of time, of the transition from one mental state to another, from one act of attention to another, from one mental object to another. Attend to the constant transition of experiences, how one moment is different from the experience that preceded it and from the experience that will follow it. Notice the flitting movement of attention from one thought to another, from one sight or sound to another, from one memory to another, from one idea to another, alighting on one experience and then another like a spotlight being shined on one scene after another, including both physical and mental scenes. See how the shining and the scene are inseparable, are parts of a single act, one following another, lighting up different regions of experience, different things to see and feel and experience. See this cloud of attention taking one shape after another, one total world of sights, sounds, feelings, and thoughts after another.

Once you have that process of attention in view, try to slice it into moments, like the frames of a film. Imagine you have a "pause" button that would freeze the present experience and keep the transition from happening. Imagine you have a camera clicking in your head. Look at all things as if you were framing a photograph. Look at whatever is in front of you now, and then quickly close and open your eyes a few times. Make your eyes into a camera shutter and record a particular moment visually on your retinas. Try to get a clear picture that you can then hold on to imaginatively, as if you were going to later be called on to paint this exact scene, with everything in whatever half gesture or awkward position it happens to be in, like some old Dutch Masters painting, this one leaning this way, that one glancing that way, bending, stretching—all frozen in mid-gesture. It might help to do this with your own body.

Suddenly call out "Freeze!" and physically stop in whatever mid-gesture you happen to find yourself in. The mind can usually freeze better when the body (particularly the movement of the eyeballs) stops, which is one reason for traditional motionless meditation postures of the body. See one photograph after another in quick succession. Each moment should be the totality of all that you experience now so that by attending to this one moment of experience, you are attending to the entire universe. To look at this moment of experience is also to look at the outside world, at mountains, rivers, sky, people, animals, feelings, memories, and at anticipations, because all of these are part of this moment of mind.

Whatever you are experiencing right now, try to separate it from all that preceded it and all that followed it. Notice what you're experiencing right now. Slice that moment of experience off from the past and the future, from what you experienced a moment ago and what you will experience a moment later. Try to make these slices as "thin" as possible so that they consist of a single ultrathin act of attention. Keep doing this and then recall that a moment ago you were seeing or thinking of something else, and foresee that in a short time you'll be seeing or experiencing something different yet again.

Now examine this one action, this one distinct and differing moment, this one discernment of a world sandwiched between a past and a future, all alone in the world. Ask yourself, Is the prior experience separate from this one? Is it inside it, or outside it? Where is the boundary between them? You will notice that the present experience exists only in contradistinction to the previous one. But if the previous one were really gone already, you would not be able to make this comparison, you would experience no contrast, and thus you would not experience the present thinly sliced in freeze-frame. The previous moment *must* be both present to be compared to and no longer present but rather specifically past and gone in order for this moment to be this moment. The prior moment is internal to this moment but also excluded from it.

Zhiyi says we find the moment of attention completely frozen, with neither source nor end, coming from nowhere and going to nowhere. It floats alone as the entirety of time, as the entirety of world, as the entirety of experience, because all "other" experiences are necessarily present there within it, its own past and future included. It is the sole re-

ality, the totality, and it is also the source of the totality and the end of the totality. It is where everything is, it is where everything came from, it is where everything is going. It goes nowhere, because the next moment is already within it. It has no actual transfer from one place to a different place, from one state to a different state, for the apparent otherness is subsumed in itself. It comes from nowhere, because the past moment is also within it. It comes only from itself, goes only to itself, forever revealing more and more of its inexhaustible richness.

By snapping the shutter of this mental camera moment after moment, separating each moment of experience from all others, we are surprised to find that we actually include the other moments, but as parts of the composition of this snapshot. The more we try to exclude them, the more we find it impossible to do so: they are always there, lurking in the peripheries, internal to the snapshot, forming its blurry fringe. Here we have a vivid and direct manifestation of the Three Truths. This moment of experience is not what it appears to be, absolutely distinct and different from all others; rather, it is empty. This moment of experience is appearing in just this way and no other, singly and distinctly; it is provisionally posited. It is only by being empty that it is provisionally posited, and vice versa. It is only by being something unique that this moment includes all others; it is only by emerging as distinct that it is coextensive with all other experiences. When the next moment comes, it finds itself still an aspect of the previous, and vice versa. This moment is the universal style exemplified by all other moments. It is expressed *as* them all, even though each is distinct from them; it subsumes them as exemplifications of its own unique style of being, just as, say, the van Gogh style is discovered in all non–van Gogh visual experiences of the world after an intense experience of the van Gogh style. It pervades them all by being uniquely itself. The same is true in the other direction: each other experience, fully experienced in this way, is found to intersubsume this moment. I experience the eternity-temporality of this moment continuing to show itself in and as the neither same nor different array of all other possible experiences, beings, ideas, moments. This is the experience of Buddhahood as all sentient beings.

So when Zhiyi then says, "It is found, when we turn back and examine it, to be neither moving nor turning, to have no source and no end,

to have nowhere it comes from or goes to," what does he mean? Don't replace the image of the spurting fountain with a blank, but rather with something that is ambiguous between motion and no-motion, between one and many, between source and result. For the "definite mark" of the process of attention is "motion," and it is this that is to be reread not as "definitely motionless," but as "ambiguous between motion and motionless," as the O is not to be seen as a blank, but to be ambiguous between the letter and the number. So we are doing this analysis to enable us to see this "spurting motion" of the fountain of mind as "readable equally as motion or non-motion." Not as "gone," as "not appearing at all," but rather as appearing just as before, appearing to have motion, but equally readable as not having any motion. How could this be?

Three intuitive options present themselves:

1. The motion of any X that is *moving together in tandem with everything else in the universe* is equally readable as non-motion. Looked at in isolation ("locally coherently"), in a limited context of a background compared to which it moves at a different pace, it seems to be in motion. When that context is put in a larger context that is moving at the same pace and in the same direction as the first item, everything is seen to be moving along with it; it is seen not to be in motion. Imagine a movie screen of a point-of-view rollercoaster: everything appears to be in motion if we look within the frame, but if we look at the frame, the screen as a whole, we see that all that motion is also (readable as) motionless. So if this moment of experience is all motion, and all the apparently static framings against which it was originally seen to be moving are then seen to be internal to it, all of the framings are also part of the motion. This moment is all motion, and everything is part of this moment, so everything is moving together. Hence everything is also still.

2. Or we might say it seems in motion *as long as I don't join in the motion*, but with a shift of perspective—in other words, if I join in the motion at the same pace, the exact same motion now reads as motionless. So if I don't separate myself at all from the motion of mind, if I "fully realize" it with nothing left out and nothing held back, it reads equally as motion and as motionless. So in this sense the upshot of the meditation might be: throw yourself completely into each instantaneous motion of mind, seeing the whole world moving with you into that motionless instant.

3. Another option is to think of this problem in terms of *instantaneous* motion, à la Zeno's paradox and similar Buddhist paradoxes: like the flying arrow, it must be in motion at every moment for there to be cumulative motion, but in another sense it has to "be" somewhere in particular at each other moment—just as "points" must occupy some space for their accumulation to produce a line, and yet as mathematical points they also cannot possibly occupy any space.

We need to bring all three of these options together in our experience of the moment. This is where the freeze-frame method becomes particularly interesting. Think about what happens when you take a photograph of a particular moment. It seems to stop time. But actually time can never stop; if you are seeing the "frozen" image, that means time is still going. You need time to see it in. But the moment has been lifted out of its original causal sequence, its original narrative stream, and made available for insertion in other sequences of causality, other streams of time. Time, or causal sequence, by "stopping," has not actually stopped; in fact, in a certain sense it has intensified, has ramified, has expanded; it has been liberated into hyper-motion, hyper-time, hyper-causality. It should be noted that this is a perfect analogue for the signature motif of the *Lotus Sūtra*, a single cause that, recontextualized, is seen to be a part of several other sequences of causality as well: scratching a Buddha-image with a fingernail or building a stupa in the sand is part of the sequence "play," and also part of the sequence "good karma for rebirth," but even, the sūtra reveals, part of what seems a completely different sequence, the bodhisattva's progress toward Buddhahood.[23] Similarly, the śrāvaka's activities are lifted out of their constrained story, where they lead to arhatship only, and found to also operate in the sequence of bodhisattvahood, leading to Buddhahood.[24] The steps of the travelers in the mountain are part of the story of being a means toward the pleasure city, but they are also lifted out of this sequence and shown to be part of the journey to the treasure.[25]

So isolating a moment—making it motionless, removing any sense of it coming from somewhere or going to somewhere else, as Zhiyi recommends in this practice, so that we see it alone in the universe, examine it just as it is rather than as part of any single particular story—actually does not arrest it, remove its motion, but instead opens it up to

all sorts of other motions, other stories, other causalities. In the very same operation we have isolated the moment from its original story, its source and end, and shown it to be a part of all stories, to entail all sources before it and all ends after it, to be the end led to by all sources and the source leading to all ends. When the moment is seen as alone in the universe, separated from its singular past and future, it is found to include all pasts and all futures. This removal of all coming and going, all motion, all process from the moment, simultaneously puts it in hyperspace, absorbing all pasts and all futures as aspects of this moment, as its sources and ends, miraculously both inside and outside it and, because *all* of them are thus co-present as its pasts and futures in spite of their manifest contradictions with one another, miraculously inside and outside each other as well. The experienced ambiguity between motion and motionless is also the experienced ambiguity between sameness and difference (of this moment and its precedents, of this moment and its subsequent moments), is also the experienced ambiguity between inner and outer, as in the floating finger. When the moment excludes everything, it is found to include everything. This is a direct experience of the Three Truths.

But there is one further option for "ambiguity between motion and non-motion." This option presupposes the presence of motion; a completely static world would not allow the ambiguity between motion and non-motion. (In some sense even the ambiguity itself is a kind of motion—i.e., a shifting between two alternatives.) Rather, it must have the experience of motion *followed by* the cancellation of that motion. A change must occur that is retrospectively seen to also be interpretable as no change at all. A difference is first experienced and then shown to be no difference at all. And of course we already have the ideal paradigm for this at the very center of Tiantai theory: the setup/punch line relation. What was serious "changes" into something funny, but then, retrospectively, we see that no change occurred: it was (also) funny all along. Both change and no-change, difference and non-difference, must be present for the joke to work. Similarly for the motion of the spouting fountain of mental activity: everything prior, everything it changed from, is seen to be the setup to itself as punch line, such that everything outside it is

necessarily both different from and the same as it, neither the same as nor different from it. This moment of experience is the punch line of the rest of the universe.

SOVEREIGNTY AND ATHEIST MIRACLE

The goal of this practice is redescribed more fulsomely by Zhiyi elsewhere: it is to perceive directly that every moment of experience is "wondrous" (*miao* 妙), "beyond conception" *bukesiyi* (不可思議), "both empty and present" (*yikong yiyou* 亦空亦有), "ambiguous, i.e., devoid of any fixed marks" (*wudingxiang* 無定相), "unobtainable, but also unrenounceable" (*bukede er bukeshe* 不可得而不可捨), such that "each sight and each scent without exception is precisely the Middle Way" (*yise yixiang wufeizhongdao* 一色一香無非中道). Every moment of experience is, we might say, an epiphany, a miracle, a self-manifestation of the totality of the unconditioned, of Nirvana, of Buddhahood, of the source and goal of all existence manifesting in and as every possible entity. Whatever is appearing right now is a direct self-presentation of the unconditional, resting on no other foundation, something that has no deeper source and has no further end outside itself, since it includes all reality, including its own foundations and goals. For to be finite and conditional, any given state of awareness would have to be the same as or different from other states, but this has been shown not to be the case: it can be neither exclusively the same as nor exclusively different from other states. And yet here it is, qua something that is definitely thus and not otherwise, present before me. Its "presence"—that is, the fact that I'm seeing it, or that I'm imagining seeing it, or that I'm even bringing up the possibility that I might be seeing it, that I'm even conceiving it as something possible to conceive or not—means precisely its "unavoidability," its necessity, its "inescapability." Just experiencing it means it can never be eliminated; it is insistently a non-negotiable part of reality; its facticity and givenness, at least as a possibility, are non-gainsayable. Merely to think it is to prove the possibility of thinking it, which makes it a necessary and unrenounceable part of the set of "all possible characteristics."

The production of this thought has happened; that means it is among the things that is non-other to all apparently other states, an ineradicable potential way of reading them all. Its being there is a non-ignorable fact, even if I later conclude that it was an illusion (as I ultimately must in every case); I must first go through the encounter with it as it appears to reach the conclusion of its illusoriness. That is what it means to have a direct perception of something or even to have a thought of something as a possible, as something about which I can inquire whether or not it is real: that it is forever an inalienable part of the totality of reality, that its elimination would mean the elimination of everything to which its production is causally related. But precisely as such, it is then also seen that there is no place or time when it can be avoided. The argument that shows the Emptiness of any putatively finite entity also applies to *the absence of that particular finite entity*, which is also finite and conditional in exactly the same way (to be finite and conditional is to exclude something, and both X and the absence of X do this: X excludes the absence of X, while the absence of X excludes X). The absence of X is just as impossible as X is. The absence of the experience of these curtains appears to exclude the experience of these curtains, just as the experience of these curtains appears to exclude the absence of this experience. But Emptiness means that both turn out to be nonexclusive and hence unobtainable as such. The absence of any finite thing is just as empty as the presence. It is both necessary and impossible; its presence is indistinguishable (upon close examination and analysis) from its absence; it is "unobtainable" yet "unavoidable." Further, its unobtainability is its unrenounceability; its impossibility is its unavoidability. That is the very meaning of the Center. Its local coherence is its global incoherence, because all of its appearances intersubsume with each other; each appearance is the totality of all other appearances.

The awareness of the process of mentation induces this experience in terms of temporal progression: the ineradicability of the past and future in the present is the necessary condition of all experience qua present experience, and yet it is impossible. I am to feel, right in the midst of my present experience as experience—in its very unfolding, in its very temporal duration, in its very occurrence as differentiation from

the previous state of mind—the simultaneous necessity of the past and impossibility of the past, the negation of the previous state of mind and the insistent inescapability of that state of mind.

This means to reveal, for any content present to consciousness, that although it is present, it is also impossible. "Impossible, and yet there it is!"[26] This is Georges Bataille's formula for "the miraculous," meaning something that breaks out of the rule of the concatenation of cause and effect, the anticipation of consequence, the subordination of effect to cause, of cause to effect, of means to end, or of end to means. The more general word for this sudden escape from subordination, particularly the subordination of one moment of time to any other moment in time (either past or future), is for Bataille "sovereignty." Tiantai practice amounts to experiencing each present experience as a sovereign miracle. But Tiantai has come upon a way to experience this sovereign miracle not as the total exclusion of all consequence as in Bataille, thereby leading to the negation of all self-preservation, all continuity, all accumulation of experience, all memory and anticipation, all achievement and self-sustenance—a formula for certain gleeful sudden death—but rather as including *all* consequences rather than one single series. What is really oppressive in non-sovereign experience is not continuity per se, but *exclusive single-series* continuity.

The liberating dimension of sovereignty lies in its transcending the iron necessity of a *single* sequence of cause and effect, which is normally what we mean by cause and effect as such, because without the exclusion of alternate sequences, causality loses its necessity and predictability. It is this loss that constitutes the liberation of sovereignty, but it can be achieved as well by maximizing temporal continuity as by destroying it: "*all possible* temporal continuities" is as much a liberation as "*no* temporal continuity." And there are two added advantages of this approach, as opposed to Bataille's: the first is that it resolves the logical paradox of Bataille's approach, for "sovereignty" was still a special state that excluded other states, hence still something to be achieved, hence still itself part of the economy of achievement and accumulation, of ends and means. He has made it an ideal to be attained, something to work toward and pine for, something missing in ordinary experience, some-

thing that other types of moments lack. The second advantage of the Tiantai alternative is, perhaps, that it allows sovereignty to coexist with remaining alive.

The implications of this approach are worth pausing over. The thirst for miracle is, like the Buddhist quest for the unconditional, a revolt against the constraint of single-series causality, of conditionality, of unfreedom, of karma. In the traditional theistic and post-theistic cultures, we have generally had only two options: we usually think of any activity that is not mechanically or physically caused as something coming from a mysterious quality called *free will*, which must be linked to a self or a personality and thence to teleology. When we try to imagine something that has no mechanical, efficient cause, there seems to be no available alternative besides asserting that it must have a *final* cause, a notion that has at its root the animistic idea of something done *by someone* and done *for a specific purpose*. Freedom from mechanical causality—from efficient cause—lands us in subordination to final causality, to personality, to purpose. The only alternatives are "It is mechanical and therefore unfree and impersonal" and "It is purposive, freely done by a real but nonmaterial personality: the mind of a human being or a spirit or a deity."

In stark contrast to this, the Tiantai rejection of mechanical causality and spontaneous causelessness (as seen in the refutation of the four alternatives: self-caused, other-caused, both, neither) also rejects the specific type of "miracle" that is usually associated with divine intervention—that is, a kind of miracle produced by someone's free will and purpose. The result of the supersession of causality, causelessness, *and* purposive miracle is *inherent entailment*—that is, the insight that what had appeared to be a caused effect, occurring at a particular time and place, is in fact an inextricable and eternal law of the universe that is actually in effect at all times and places but in an infinite variety of forms. What it is, in fact, is the Absolute itself, the Middle Way, the Buddha-nature, the source and end of all other dharmas, ever present, eternal, always operating and responding and producing itself as all other dharmas in all other sequences at once. This is the "wondrousness," the "inconceivability" of all dharmas in Tiantai context: a transcending of mechanical causality that does not revert in any way to a concept of free will or purposive intervention, rather just the opposite.

Free will is primarily a juridical concept. It evolves in the context of the notion of a deity as personal, as purposive, as conscious only, with a single unified notion of the "good." Christian theology required an absolutist conception of free will, from Augustine onward, in order to square two conflicting planks of its theological platform: on the one hand, God is to be omnipotent and omni-benevolent, but on the other hand, the Christian scriptures threaten eternal punishment to some human beings. This requires some notion of genuine, absolute guilt and total responsibility to justify such punishment: the sinner must be really and fully responsible for his sin if God is not to appear unjust, for if God is in any way responsible for the sinful actions, God appears to be punishing unjustly.

In Buddhism there is no concept of free will in this juridical sense. When we refute the absoluteness of the concept of efficient causality, we arrive at a kind of miraculous manifestation that is not equivalent to the freedom of purposive activity of a self. Quite the opposite. What we have here is precisely miracle in a distinctly *atheist* sense. This is the Tiantai understanding of *all phenomena without exception*: they are *all* to be contemplated as "atheist miracles" in just this sense, "wondrous" (*miaojing* 妙境), beyond conception (*bukesiyijing* 不可思議境). This is precisely what is meant to be realized in Tiantai meditation practice, because this means to reveal that for any content present to consciousness, although it is present it is also impossible. Such is miracle in the specifically atheist sense: not the breaking of the single chain of mechanical causality to allow the epiphany of another kind of single-sequence causality—that is, *intentional, deliberate, teleological, purposive* causality produced by the free will of a deity. That would be simply escaping one subordination—to mechanical causality, to the secular order—to land in an even worse one: that of purpose, of personality, of free will imposed by the person of God, and with it the demand for accountability through our own free will.

Miracle in the usual, theistic sense means going out of the frying pan of single-sequence mechanistic causality into the fire of single-sequence final causality, free will, reward and punishment, the inescapable authority of God. The Tiantai conception of every moment of experience as inconceivable is still much closer to Bataille's atheist notion of miracle

and sovereignty, but here too the differences are highly instructive. We might be tempted to say that the Tiantai overcoming of single-series causality means that each experience is self-caused and "autotelic"—no longer subordinated to a goal external to itself. However, the experience is not self-caused in the manner of a substance, because then it would have to have some characteristic that is constantly manifest, and no such characteristic can be found. Indeed, it can never be found, for it would have to be constantly present, in which case it would never be experienced. Rather, the self-manifestation of an experience occurs only in the form of manifestation of othernesses, of diversity from itself, constant ekstases, constant kenosis: it is always, unconditionally and uncausedly, appearing, but it is appearing in an infinity of *alternate forms* and *causal chains*. Its nature is constant self-othering (which we call time, impermanence, and so on, but also compassion, upāya, and so on).

The present moment's glimpse of the curtains may certainly be considered an epiphany of what it is that is always appearing in this infinity of alternate forms. It reveals all other entities to be inseparable from it, dependent on it, aspects to it, internal to its sourceless, foundationless self-manifestation. That means this glimpse of the curtains is what all other entities really are, their eternal source, their encompassing infinity, their highest good (and, vice versa, each of them is the source and end of whatever is appearing). The answer to the questions "What is the meaning of life?" "What is the point of all this?" "Where does it all come from?" "What is the final end of all history?" "What is the reality behind appearances?" "What is the force that through the green fuse drives the flower?" "What explains all this confusion and suffering?" "What resolves all questions?" "What is the ultimate reality?" "What is the joy of man's desiring?" and "What is the unconditioned underlying all conditioned phenomena, and the attainment of which provides the only possible end to suffering?" is given in each moment of experience: "this glimpse of these curtains." But it applies equally to whatever might be going on. The teacup is as much the substantial source expressed by the glimpse of the curtains as the curtains are the source expressed by the teacup.

Bataille's concept of sovereignty sees that both mechanical causality and teleological free-will causality are equally oppressive, and for

the same reason: both subordinate this moment to other moments in one way or another. Bataille thus proposes a third way: a real liberation from all subordination. But this means embracing death at each moment, throwing oneself away without concern for any set of consequences, whether of personal harm or of personal guilt. This is a step in the right direction, seeing the real nature of the problem, although its solution to that problem comes at a very high cost. But it overlooks a fourth possibility—the Tiantai possibility—which also overcomes all subordination at the convergence of constant death and the constant co-presence, not of infinite life, but of infinite *lives*. The convergence of continuity and discontinuity, of sameness and difference, allows an overcoming of single-series subordination in the form of omni-subordination rather than anti-subordination.

In Tiantai we must indeed view "centrality" as meaning "the source of all other dharmas, subordinated to none" and "the goal toward which all other dharmas tend, the ultimate end sought by all their activities, revealed at last." But this is seen to be synonymous to inclusion in all possible sequences at once, subordinated to all. Each subordination is overcome not by nothingness, but by *all the other forms of subordination*, including the *reversed* form. To be is to subordinate all and to be subordinated to all, to subsume all and to be subsumed by all. To see any moment of experience as the Center is not just to see it as coming from nowhere, going nowhere, outside the chain of causality—in other words, as "unconditional" in the older Buddhist sense of Nirvana—but also to see that unconditionality cannot be the total exclusion of causality.

The claim here is not that it arises from nothing at all, not that it just springs spontaneously into existence for no reason, free-floating, a burst of miracle. Rather, it redefines "miracle" to include causality, redefines "unconditionality" to include conditionality. The alternative is not between "no causality" and "one unique chain of causality," but between "one unique chain of causality" and "all possible chains of causality"—unconditionality is actually omni-conditionality. The raft of conditionality leads not to the "other shore" of unconditionality, but to the "raft factory" of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the creation of infinite rafts. In other words, the liberation from subordination of means to end, or present to future, is found not in the isolation of all moments (or entities), but in the elim-

ination of *one-way* subordination. The overcoming of subsumption is not fragmentation into atomistic momentariness, but intersubsumption of all moments as eternities, each consisting of all other moments. We transcend the subordination of causality by our more total submersion in it: not just susceptible to one single stream of otherness, but subordinated to all and thereby subordinating all, subordinating all and thereby subordinated to all, at once. Thus is the atheist miracle revealed as each moment of Tiantai experience.

TEN

TIANTAI ETHICS AND THE WORST-CASE SCENARIO

WE HAVE NOW SEEN IN WHAT WAYS TIANTAI BUDDHISM FULFILLS the promise of the new Middle Way suggested in the *Lotus Sūtra*, incorporating and reconfiguring classical Mahāyāna ideas about Emptiness, Two Truths, and Original Enlightenment, and how radically it pursues the ideas of the non-dualism of time and timelessness, of desire and desirelessness, of self and other, of mind and matter, of cause and effect, of delusion and enlightenment, and even of good and evil. The implied principles of Tiantai ethics should be obvious. Do you want to change the world, or something in the world, or something in yourself, or in other people? Then don't "change" it at all; rather, *recontextualize* it. Changing it, in the sense of eradicating this state or situation, is impossible, and the futile attempt to do so is counterproductive. Addressing any problem in its own terms, in the terms in which it presents itself to you as a problem, is a form of attachment to the reality of that situation as a non-ambiguous fact, which works for the reinforcement of the rigid unseen contextualizers that define the situation in precisely that way; it turns out, rather, to be a way of further entrenching future repetitions of exactly the state or situation you are trying to eliminate. The situation is paradoxical: the attempt to change a situation is what entrenches it, while a radical acceptance is the first step toward transforming it.

In the Tiantai view, all states and situations are inevitably and inextricably implied in, virtually present in, discoverable in, all other states and situations. If you know about something and have had time to dislike it and want it to go away, then it already exists. Even if you destroy it now in the literal sense, its impact will continue to function as a memory,

as a cause for further effects, as something that is really just showing other sides of itself even when it is ostensibly destroyed. Nothing can be destroyed or changed in the absolute sense, but at the same time, everything is always being destroyed and changed. The ethical challenge is to recognize what item can be added to this situation that will recontextualize it in a way that will transform it, while accepting its full citizenship in the world, accepting its ineradicability in the world, and derive its unique and indispensable resources for the world in a desirable way—in whatever definition of "desirable" is informing one's current epistemological situation and context. The trick is to find the right frame, the right pace, the right dosage, the right style for it—a larger context, a smaller framework, an angled camera approach, a syncopated setting, a staggered access, a rhyming coda. The right one will change the situation's value, identity, significance entirely while also leaving it entirely unchanged, just as the symbol "O" might be experienced as a "circle" when placed alone on a page, but will magically "become" something else when recontextualized: the letter O when other letters are put around it or the symbol for "zero" when numbers are placed around it. As we have seen, not one molecule of the symbol changes, and yet its identity and meaning have completely changed, just as the setup of a joke changes its value when the punch line finally occurs, becoming funny in retrospect, but only because it was the very opposite of funny.

Tiantai ethics enable a very radical form of non-judgment, because there is really no way to know what anything is yet. It is always too soon to know how anything will turn out. And there is no "final judgment"; there will always be more time coming, more recontextualizations, so there really is no single way they will turn out. This means not to judge others nor their actions, of course, but more astonishingly it also means we cannot judge ourselves, our own actions, our own feelings, or even our own intentions. As the case of Devadatta showed, even my present evil intention might turn out, in retrospect, to have another meaning. It is only the judgment, the arbitrary limiting of *when* the final call about it is made, that makes it one thing or another definitively. It is our own setting up of the temporal boundary that way when "this event" is over and in a position to be judged. In reality there is no last judgment of anything; transformations just go on and on. I may think I am suffering

now, but even that is not a simple fact. Like the setup to a punch line, my present suffering might turn out, in retrospect, to have been a strange form of joy. We do not, cannot, know once and for all what we are, what others are, what we are doing, what others are doing, what we are experiencing, what others are experiencing. However, it must be remembered that the "strange form of joy" that I later discover my present pain to be can *only* be experienced by first experiencing it as pain, by taking its present local coherence at face value, as in the setup of a joke. It is only then that the contrast, as between seriousness and humor of setup and punch line, which alone makes the "pain" a form of "joy," can occur. So at the same time as judging nothing, we can and must confidently go ahead and judge everything *exactly as it appears to us at each moment*, affirming each local coherence, taking everything at its own face value. It is the convergence, the intersubsumption, of these two seemingly opposite ethical attitudes that constitutes the unique principle of Tiantai ethics. This total acceptance of every way of appearing as the ultimate reality and the complete suspension of judgment, the openness to whatever something might yet turn out to be, turn out to be the same thing.

But even when this has been clarified, a nagging question may have occurred to many readers when considering this approach to ethics as it dawns on them just how far Tiantai Buddhist theory carries this "no destruction" policy, this "nothing can be changed" intuition, this "all realities are ineradicable expressions of the One Buddha Vehicle" perspective, or the deliberately provocative but uniquely Tiantai claim that "evil is inherent in and ineradicable from Buddhahood"—that is, how far it is therefore willing to go in integrating, and therefore seemingly "justifying," evil and suffering. What would these Tiantai writers, with their bizarre ideas about the interpenetration—nay, identity—of good and evil, have to say about the worst-case scenario, the most extreme case—for example, about Hitler and the Holocaust?[1]

Bringing this particular topic up as a casual example to be employed in an armchair conversation, in effect "making use of" the mountains of corpses in the context of an ivory-tower discussion of subtle logical and ontological hair-splitting, is problematic for all sorts of reasons. For one thing, it is obviously in rather questionable taste. For another, historians are by no means in agreement about the real material and

ideological causes of this disaster, nor for that matter even how to delineate exactly what we are referring to when we fling around words like "the Holocaust." But there are points to be made here, and it is a valid question to put to a doctrine that makes such eyebrow-raising claims about the ineradicably self-expanding and self-negating nature of evil, a question that needs to be addressed—indeed, that we cannot help addressing. For in all seriousness, these mountains of corpses are always already in play in the background of our discussions of moral doctrines, perhaps even in the interstices of our casual entertainments, and we let ourselves off too easy if we leave them in the background as unexamined, prepackaged moral tokens or stock bugaboos whose "use value" in the culture has already been non-negotiably and comfortably mapped out. Not so much as an unknowable historical fatality but as a cultural symbol, it is a stand-in term for irredeemably radical evil in all its forms, for all the most hideous events seen in killing fields and torture camps of all kinds and in all places, a marker for hard historical realities that seem to be—and are—the despair and shame of any Pollyannaish Panglossism.

It is the extreme test case that anyone who wants to talk seriously about values and ethics must face head-on, precisely because it is a symbol for the very excess of the reality of evil over any theoretical amelioration. We may stipulate as axiomatic that no moral response yet proposed to the Holocaust, during or after, has been "adequate." No moral position has succeeded in justifying itself in the face of this particular event. Indeed, some regard the very idea of any adequacy of response here as unthinkable even in principle, seeing the only truly moral response to the Holocaust (and really the same could be said of the all-too-common large-scale exemplars of runaway human cruelty and suffering) to be a recognition of its incommensurability to any theory, any well-meaning moral ameliorism, or any facile truisms about how evils are to be dealt with or what meager goods might be derivable from them after the fact. In this view there is simply no way of discussing these tragedies that is not somehow a profound desecration of the memory of the victims and the experiences of the survivors, from the comfortable and well-meaning position of "sitting here with the leisure to make proclamations about it because we're not being tortured and murdered."

There is considerable merit to this opinion. It should go without saying that there is always a sense in which there is really nothing to say about the immovable facticity of human suffering, even in its smallest quantum, much more so in these horrific historical conflagrations. But the existence of ideas, of theory, perhaps of human thought in general, is in effect a gamble that even though most of what has ever happened is horrible and uncontrollable and incomprehensible and always will be, it's still worthwhile to say or think something about it, however ridiculous, on the off chance that it might make whatever has happened 99 percent horrible rather than 100 percent horrible. The wager involved in human thinking as such is that there just might somehow be something to be gained by saying or thinking something about whatever happens, even though it might be for the most part unchangeable, utterly beyond our power, and fundamentally irredeemable.

This pessimistic premise looms even larger in the specific case of Tiantai thought, where obviously there can never be any question of attempting to say or think something that could somehow magically "make everything all right." On the contrary, as we've just seen, the centerpiece of Tiantai doctrine is the idea that evil, delusion, and suffering are really ineradicable elements of all reality, omnipresent throughout all other states of existence—past, present, and future—even the highest bliss and the highest goodness of the highest state of enlightenment. The starting point has to be the uncompromising admission that suffering and evil are forever present everywhere, and precisely as suffering and evil. And yet it is true that Tiantai takes this as a metaphysical fact that has profound ethical implications: the ineradicability of evil is itself something that can be used to transform our experience of the world from that of 100 percent terribleness to a 99 percent terribleness, and that difference makes all the difference, that difference is the difference between delusion and enlightenment, just as a 1 percent difference in DNA is the difference between a human being and a chimpanzee.

Granted that no view or theory can make everything all right, might a theory nonetheless make it all right that everything is not all right? Or is it "better" that it not be all right that everything's not all right? Can a theory, then, perhaps make it "better" in that way at least—that is, in making sure it's not all right that everything is not all right? Can it make

it all right that it is not all right that everything is not all right? This kind of nested co-presence of alternate valences is part of what we face in thinking about Tiantai theory, and about its understanding of its own relation to the recalcitrance of the badness of the world. How does this tragic view of the world amount to such optimism; how does such optimism amount to such a tragic view? What does Tiantai theory have to say about the most horrifying beliefs and actions and consequences, and why would it bother, since it grants their ineradicability? For all of these reasons I want to take this opportunity to extend the thought experiment and respond to this challenge, speaking for the sake of argument in the name of the Tiantai doctrine, in the hopes that this will perhaps initiate a dialogue with specialists in other systems of moral theory who might attempt a similar experiment.

To really get comfortable in the shoes of the imagined Tiantai ideologue and apologist, to attempt this thought experiment in all seriousness, it will be necessary to review a few of the more general theoretical questions raised in our discussion so far. The first of these concerns the relation between ultimate truth and provisional truth. The Tiantai position, as we have seen, gives a higher status to provisional or conventional truth than most Mahāyāna Two Truths doctrines. In Tiantai, conventional truth is equal in validity and ultimacy to "ultimate" truth. Hence we must not understand the Tiantai stress on the non-duality of good and evil as an "overprivileging" of the "ultimate" point of view, which many Mahāyāna Buddhists, and others, would agree to be a perspective of radical non-duality. That is, Tiantai Buddhism does *not* merely say, as even strict scientific naturalists would agree, "In ultimate truth, there is no good or evil; all is empty of predication, neutral to human values, beyond good and evil. But in conventional truth, in the practical handling of human ethics and spiritual cultivation, it is necessary and legitimate to posit the all-important distinction between good and evil as a guide to human action." Indeed, these systems claim, the non-dual point of view is insufficient and cannot really help us without being supplemented by the relative point of view that distinguishes, albeit temporarily, between good and evil.

We will note that this position, like the Tiantai position, sees the necessity of the inseparability of provisional and ultimate truth. The

crucial difference, however, is that in Tiantai thought conventional truth and ultimate truth are actually identical, not merely distinct, but necessarily complementary, paired, and interdependent. We will return to the question of the "identity" as opposed to the mere "interdependence" of contrasted entities in a moment. But it is important to be clear that the Tiantai position does not assert some sort of ultimate transcendental indifferentism that finally discards or goes beyond conventional truth, with all of its dualities and differentiations.

What sometimes perhaps leads to this misapprehension is precisely the thoroughgoingness with which Tiantai accepts provisional, conventional truth, because in contrast to many forms of Indian Mahāyāna, Tiantai asserts that there is not only one set of conventional truths (for example, ordinary speech plus Buddhist ethics and values), but rather an infinite number of alternate sets. Quite literally, all possible assertions, beliefs, and positions count as conventional truths. All of these assertions and belief systems in some way make a distinction between what they consider good and bad acts, but in various partial and idiosyncratic ways. Any definite view is necessarily delusional in some sense, when taken in itself, and Tiantai views this delusion itself as the locus of its transcendence of its own delusiveness. "Lower" truth, in other words, includes both Hitler's delusional worldview (where good might be defined as, say, the dominance of the "master race" and the extermination of the Jews) and Śākyamuni's (where good might be defined as wisdom, compassion, and liberation for all beings)—a much more uplifting form of delusion for most of us—without denying a possible hierarchy between them when viewed relative to the particular goals or situations pertaining to the vast majority of sentient beings known to us. We have here a nesting or stair-stepping inverted pyramid of wider and wider sets of conventional truths, although even this hierarchy is not to be conceived as unidirectional and fixed for all time. But the point here is that Tiantai does not assert, for example, that "in higher truth" Hitler and Śākyamuni are equal in that both are "empty," but that in conventional truth Śākyamuni is right and Hitler is wrong or that the two are interdependent.

Rather, the point is that Hitler's and Śākyamuni's value systems, qua determinate value systems, *both* belong in the realm of conventional

truths, as relevant to particular situations. Both can be harmful; both can be helpful. This in no way prevents us from saying that, for living beings like ourselves, it is fair to infer that Śākyamuni's value system has a radically wider range of applications and hence a (much) more frequent claim to be considered a "higher" conventional truth, but only because of its ability to encompass, utilize, and sublate—that is, to "interpenetrate with"—the former. Although in any given situation one view may be more open and more unifying than the other, we can never determine once and for all that this will always and in every case be so. Hence, Tiantai avoids the demand that we should discard the conventional level of right versus wrong in favor of some higher realm where there is neither right nor wrong, or discard a presently less frequently unifying view in order to preserve only a presently more frequently unifying view. The point is not to "discard" any claim, ever. The point is to recontextualize them to maximize their intersubsumption in any given situation.

Mahāyāna Buddhism in general holds that all entities imply and depend on one another. This also applies to any entity that is defined, according to whatever system of values, as good and to whatever that same system defines as bad. It even applies to their "goodness" and "badness" as such. Tiantai, however, makes the further claim that good and evil are identical. According to Tiantai thinking, the idea that two entities might be mutually implicative and dependent—not adventitiously, but in their nature—and yet not identical is logically impossible, because this would mean they have some "identity" other than their relation to each other, which is just what the doctrine of dependent co-arising qua Emptiness denies. It is not possible to make a hard-and-fast distinction between "the identity of X (i.e., what it is)" and "the implications and relations of X (i.e., how it is, what it does)" without thereby positing some self-nature, some substance of which these implications and relations are predicates. We cannot divide "that which depends" from "its relation of dependence" or "that which it depends on" in any non-arbitrary, once-and-for-all way without denying dependent co-arising. So it will not do to understand this Buddhist doctrine as meaning simply, "Each thing is what it is, but they are made so by their interdependence such that what happens to one affects all the others"—a commonplace plati-

tude, in fact, of all consistent materialist and naturalist theories, both European and Asian.

Being affected and being X are not two different facts, and in a Tiantai perspective it is not adequate to assign entities a fixed identity, which happens to also be interdependently constructed, for "conventional truth" while saving up their Emptiness for "ultimate truth." That is why, in Tiantai, we find not Two Truths, but Three (provisional positing, Emptiness, and the Center); Emptiness is not ultimate truth, but rather one more type of conventional truth. In the Tiantai view, each possible way of viewing "what a given entity is" is seen to necessarily entail alternate ways of viewing it, alternate versions of what it is. For an object to be real, rather than a mere figment of my imagination, means that it is viewable not only from my own perspective but from other perspectives as well, and hence that it, the selfsame object, can simultaneously appear in a multitude of alternate ways, can be viewed from other angles besides the one from which it is being viewed here and now. In this view, to see this object as a cup and to see it as empty are merely two among an infinite number of ways the object qua object insists on being seen. It is not that it is "cup," or even "cup qua interdependent with all other entities," in conventional truth and "empty" in ultimate truth and that this is the end of the matter. Rather, it is intersubjectively determined at all times by all possible mutually entailing views of it. The view that it is a "cup here in my living room, useful for holding my coffee" is, as Zhanran likes to say, a *small part* of provisional truth (*shidi shaofen* 世諦少分).[2] In traditional terms, this object is also, say, an instrument of torture (to a hell-being), a reminder of thirst (to a hungry ghost), and so on, up to a disclosure of salvific Emptiness, because it is dependently co-arisen (to a certain kind of Buddhist disciple), an instrument by which to save sentient beings (to a bodhisattva) and a direct manifestation of all entities that are interpervasively present as the entirety of the Buddha-nature (to a Buddha). Interpenetration lies in the unclosability, unfinalizability, of each and any of these views, including the view that it is empty, which is itself merely the view belonging to one perspective. Each of the identities provisionally assigned to this object is "a small part" of conventional truth. The relation between provisional and ultimate truth is not merely one of instrumentality, transcendence, and contrasted negation; rather,

provisional truth is a portion of ultimate truth, in a peculiar omnicentric sort of whole/part relation in which each part contains the whole. Interpenetration is not only a truth (whether conventional or ultimate) about things; it also applies to partial truths themselves, to views, to existential positions.

It is on the basis of such premises that Tiantai thought asserts that in reality there is no choice between "eradicating" and "recontextualizing" evils. To attempt to act upon any object, even with the goal of eradicating it, is to presuppose its prior existence, to admit it as a brute fact. That we can become aware of it as an object at all means it is in the past and can no longer be removed from the totality of all that is and from what must therefore be interpenetrating ceaselessly with every subsequent moment of experience. It cannot be erased; it can only be added to and thereby reconfigured, alternately understood. The question when we are confronted with an evil deed, event, or intention is not how to get rid of it, but what to do with it now. It is idle to simply wish it had never occurred. It is transformed, then, not by the futile attempt to avoid it or erase it, but through emptying it of its putative self-nature and allowing the other, contrarily valued aspects of this original entity to shine forth. Good and bad are identical only in this sense—that is, not as brute self-natured entities, but as mutually entailing. The *identity* of evil includes the characteristic of "entailing the good," and vice versa; this is not merely a temporary or accidental characteristic that might be added on to them. Hence, Zhili says that evil (or good) is to be "realized," "cut off," and "neither realized nor cut off," not as three options, but as alternate names for the same procedure. To realize the nature of X is to cut off its putative identity as "only-X" or as "X that excludes non-X." This conclusion can be assailed in various ways from outside Mahāyāna Buddhism, but it is difficult to see how it can be avoided once the basic premises of Nāgārjunian Emptiness doctrine are accepted and then, importantly, thought through.

This is how Tiantai understands the universal Buddhist measure of "letting go" of our evil desires, with which our discussion of Buddhism started at the beginning of this book. "Letting go," in the Tiantai view, is another word for a certain species of "contextualizing." Letting desires go is one way that one "acts upon them," because to let go

means to no longer attempt to fix an entity within a single, privileged frame of reference, but to allow all other horizons of relevance to unfold, thereby allowing the entity in question to transform, manifesting its alternate identities, which are not added to it, but have been what it was all along. Even to let go in the sense of allowing some thought to remain unrenewed, to let it fade out, to sit in its position in the past, is nothing but a recontextualization, because in the Tiantai understanding, time, impermanence itself, is nothing but constant recontextualization. Letting go does not mean that the past is "gone" in the annihilationist sense, because this would entail a reverse self-nature view. Rather, it means the past remains as it is, and yet thereby new meanings are ceaselessly emerging from it, or *as* it. Indeed, one way of "recontextualizing" a previous deed—although not the only way—is "to cease to do it." This makes neither "wanting to do the deed" nor "having done the deed" go away; these are already eternal facts. Rather, it is a way of dealing with the fact that this deed and this impulse are already there to be responded to.

In the case of "evil" actions, saying "try not to do it again" is thus also a kind of recontextualization of that action. And for everyday situations, we can assume this would most likely be the first response of a Tiantai Buddhist, just as it would be for most non-Tiantai Buddhists and many other well-intentioned people. In the vast majority of cases, Tiantai would promote normal commonsensical Buddhist morality: the best thing to do is to try to overcome greed, anger, and delusion; foster compassion for all beings; and in general minimize suffering in whatever way possible. As we've seen, in Buddhism the standard by which to determine what ideas and practices can be considered "good" is the degree to which they are conducive to the reduction of suffering, with the premise that this is generally accomplished through greater awareness and less attachment, and through dispelling illusions of substantiality, essence, permanence, and definite selfhood. Clinging to *any* belief is ultimately a cause of suffering, and it is true that ultimately this includes even the belief in the existence of unambiguous facts per se. Morally unwholesome deeds are seen as the consequence of clinging rigidly to some fixed idea as if it were absolute.

But Buddhist teaching is conceived of as incremental, and the first level of teaching tentatively and heuristically accepts commonsensical

facts and standards, and the very notions of facts and standards, because it assumes that the "evildoers" themselves have some conceptions of "fact" and "standard" that frame their sense of what they are doing and why it is good for them or for the world—in particular, an embodied belief about the "fact" of suffering, which informs all of their desires and actions, which in turn inform their cognitive beliefs. In many cases a person's especially grievous delusions can be shown to be unwarranted *within that person's own accepted notion of factuality*, often by being shown to be counterproductive with respect to what they themselves believe to be "suffering." This can often be accomplished simply by getting someone to do something called "listening to reason" and "taking heed of the facts" in whatever sense they are already committed to doing in their other ordinary relations with the world, in all matters outside their specific destructive delusional obsession. Mainly, it needs to be shown that this particular behavior conflicts with the person's other commitments, especially to their commitment to acting in a way that will not cause their own suffering, which is tautologically built in to the nature of desire as desire, even if it is a desire to suffer: suffering is wanted because it will relieve the further suffering of not getting all the suffering one wants. This approach basically just amounts to saying, "Stop doing what you're doing, because in fact it's causing suffering both to others and even to yourself, in terms of your own pre-reflective definitions of what suffering is and what facts are, though you haven't noticed this until now. Let us point out to you exactly how."

This is standard Buddhist stuff. The assumption behind it is that the sentient being in question will agree to call something in his experience factually "suffering," although as we have seen, this will turn out, on the Tiantai rewrite of the ontology of alleged facts, to be far from straightforward. We don't need to surreptitiously import a sub-Tiantai notion of objective truth to dispel these delusions; all that is required is the application of a single epistemological standard to this obsession, the same one the person in question applies to other types of decisions and judgments and assessments. Racist belief, for example, is in many cases (when it has not yet become so central and powerful a tenet as to ground a total racist vision of the world, bending all other considerations around itself, as seems to have been case with Hitler) pretty easily demonstrated

to be irrational and unjustifiable even by the standards embodied in the racist's own daily practice of separating probable from improbable explanations, since it is based on such a rickety Rube Goldberg device of generalizations and selective abstractions and arbitrary associations. The ways in which these cause suffering (in whatever ways suffering is defined and experienced by the racist himself) can often be shown fairly directly. All this is effectively countered by standard cultural critique and deconstruction, cognitive-behavior mindfulness therapy, rigorous fact-checking, or plain old-fashioned Buddhist analysis of abstractions into unstable confabulations of temporary conditions. A Tiantai bodhisattva faced with the everyday kind of racism would probably be using these commonplaces most of the time as well. The internal standard of consistency with the racist's own views can often be applied to dispel the inconsistency (in those cases where he happens also to be committed to the idea of consistency).

As a first approach, then, a Tiantai bodhisattva will probably always try to enhance the awareness of his listener so as to show the conceptual errors embodied in his pre-reflective opinions and perceptions, the attachment to facts where there are no facts, and how this is affecting perception and causing suffering and thereby further perpetuating the unjustified belief. The key terms used in this style of suasion (e.g., "suffering," "consistency," "fact") are all drawn from that sentient being's own prior beliefs and procedures of assessment about other matters in the world, even though they may not be ultimate truths. The aim is to dispel the greed and anger and prejudicial attachments that provide the affective motivation for applying such skewed standards of adjudication in this particular case alone. The belief that wealth produces happiness, the belief that I have a self, the belief that there exists a single unambiguous external world, the belief that my actions and beliefs can be tailored to maximize my well-being in the world, the belief that cause and effect cannot be arbitrarily linked without threatening my well-being, as well as the belief that Mexicans are rapists, the belief that Jews rule the world economy, the belief that cars are really robot squirrels sent by alien overlords: these are all in the same boat. None is literally true; all can in some cases be made to serve wholesome purposes (reduction of suffering of sentient beings); some of them, the ones we think of as morally

wholesome, are astronomically more likely to do so in our present situation than others: these are the ones that constitute our raft, and these are what are chosen from among all untrue beliefs to be the Buddhist moral teachings as a form of conventional truth. These would be widely shared beliefs like "there is a single unambiguous external world," on the one hand, and specially ethically useful beliefs like "my actions and beliefs can be tailored to maximize my well-being" or "cause and effect cannot be arbitrarily linked without threatening my well-being," on the other.

Now, if someone who embraced these three beliefs also embraced the belief that "all Mexicans are rapists," but not the belief that "cars are alien robot squirrels," we could legitimately ask why one and not the other, pointing out the inconsistency, without ourselves having to believe in the ultimate reality of a single unambiguous external world or some unambiguous condition called someone's "well-being" (or even the requirement of consistency: this too is, by hypothesis, our listener's prior commitment, not ours). We could show how both of these beliefs conflict with the prior commitment to the core "raft" beliefs of conventional truth, and yet one of them is accepted and the other is abandoned. But this rejection of some beliefs in favor of others, on the basis of consistency, is really only a first step, a raft. In the end, all these procedures are stepping-stones to abandoning *all* of the above beliefs when taken in their literal sense as ultimate truths, even the belief in unambiguous facts as such. In the Tiantai case, that is itself a stepping-stone to a further step—namely, to then also reinstate each of these beliefs in a new sense, as omnipresent and inherently entailed in all other views, times, and places, and as inherently entailing all other views, times, and places: as the Center.

Perhaps the reason such a radical further move is necessary will now have become apparent to some readers of this somewhat rosy picture of unproblematic rational persuasion and moral transformation. For in real life, in many if not most cases, delusions that are in flagrant violation of the facts and canons of experience as otherwise embraced by the holders of those delusions are nonetheless stubbornly clung to, making them impossible to eradicate through the above-described standard procedure. We cannot expect everyone always to "listen to reason," however reason is construed by that particular person, even in the relativized

sense outlined above. For in some cases, a total vision of the world has become entrenched around a particularly fanatical belief, bending all other data and principles to its service but remaining itself unchallengeable and unexploded, for it is already incapable of sensitivity to any external critique. It has created a world interpretation around itself that is so thoroughgoing and consistent that any opposition simply fails to be felt, or is discounted as dismissible beforehand simply by virtue of its opposition. A bodhisattva's goal here would still be to dispel attachment to beliefs, to all beliefs. But the stepping-stone method of general Buddhist theory, of raft and other shore, of surgical strikes on inconsistent or unwholesome beliefs within a generally wholesome raft of a framework, leading eventually to effective abandonment of the whole raft, will not work here.

The only way to dispel this kind of total belief is for it to explode itself *from within*. It is here that the specifically Tiantai approach provides a much-needed additional tool: to overcome and reverse stubbornly held fanatical beliefs from within precisely by expanding and in a very special sense "preserving" them. This sort of procedure, leading to a fully radical vision of the interpervasion of good and evil, would probably almost never be used to answer a practical question about "what to do about evil" for everyday purposes, or to a novice practitioner or outsider. Rather, the advice in those cases would normally be "cut off evil and practice only good" as outlined above. In Tiantai even this teaching would have to be understood in a different way, which might or might not be fleshed out to that particular listener much later, on a very different occasion. However, even then the peculiar Tiantai meanings of "cut off" and "practice," when further explained, would not be presented as rejections or alternatives to the "cutting off" or "practicing" that had already occurred in ordinary moral practice, but rather as a recontextualization of that very "cutting off" and "practicing," revealing further aspects of what the identities of these practices had always already been, of just what one was doing when someone "cut off" evils and "practiced" goods. And what is this peculiar Tiantai meaning? Apparently, according to all we have learned, it is that "to cut off evil" turns out to mean "expanding evil" to the point of omnipresence, which is also its self-overcoming into unconditionality and therefore goodness. "To practice good," it turns

out, is the same thing: to expand evil to the point of its self-overcoming into omnipresence, into unconditionality, into goodness. The evil that is cut off in this way turns out to be the same as the good that is practiced, and indeed, the practicing is the same as the cutting off.

This, then, is the challenge before us. Even if we accept in principle the Tiantai doctrine that evil is overcome not through being discarded, but through a kind of recontextualization meant to facilitate this peculiar form of evil's expansion into omnipresence, we may well ask the following questions: What contextualization, what punch line, could do anything with a setup like the Holocaust? What would it mean to "overcome through expansion" in this case? How could the omnipresence of this kind of evil possibly serve to overcome this evil? How can accepting and even dwelling on this unchangeable evil simultaneously make something good of this evil, precisely through the expanded unconditional omnipresence of evilness? What would "expansion" even mean in this case? Destroying all race enemies everywhere, and invading and occupying all nations, not just those in Europe? Causing destruction everywhere and at all times, not just on earth and in the twentieth century? It sounds like it could only make matters worse, much worse.

These are daunting questions, so let us proceed slowly and tentatively. But really what could a Tiantai Buddhist say about this? As a first approach, let us imagine a genocidal murderer who, by some chance, encounters and accepts Buddhism and then even Tiantai theory. This is of course already a wildly optimistic best-case scenario; in real life, this would already be a rare victory. But lest we have the slightest attachment to any utopian hopes of a panacea of any kind, let us stipulate, as seems likely in real life, that this intellectual and even emotional assent to Tiantai teachings leaves this person's old habitual obsessive desire to murder undiminished. He still wants to kill, in spite of his new belief system. The presupposition here is that our selves are radically multiform; it is very common to believe something is bad with the most lucid part of our executive function, but to still feel a strong drive to do that thing. The so-called "self" is a composite, according to Buddhism; hence we should expect many conflicting and semi-independent systems of desires to be uneasily and unstably joined in any given "self." Further, Buddhism in general sees these desires as embodying a set of views and beliefs; each

stubborn component obsession is a semi-autonomous mini-self encoding its own inexplicit premises and conclusion, embracing a position and a set of values about how the world is and what is desirable. So in the case before us, we can imagine one part of the murderer understanding and accepting Buddhism, and thus being committed to compassion and the relieving of the suffering of all sentient beings; a further part of him is convinced and energized by Tiantai Buddhism in particular, and is thus thrilled and galvanized by the ideas of co-presence and omnipresence and intersubsumption and so on.

But there is still a part of him that loves killing above all else, sees killing as the only good, wants only to kill. Let us stipulate for the sake of our thought experiment that this part of him is very strong and very skilled already at sustaining and regenerating itself into the future, so that he cannot eradicate it simply by bringing it into relation to the opposite ideas and values that are also in him. Tiantai then allows him another course: without attempting to eradicate it, he reconsiders the meaning and nature of this fact about himself, this desire to kill: he treats it as an object of Tiantai meditation, without trying to eliminate it. The result of this is not that he will discontinue murdering just as before (that is still far too much to hope for), but that he will come to see "murder," this thing that part of him stubbornly desires above all others, no longer as a definite activity with strictly defined boundaries, fulfillable only in that narrowly defined way: the distinctive characteristic of "murdering" that he was constantly seeking to experience, the highest "good" constantly sought in the system of belief embraced by this subself, turns out to be something that is composed of and expresses itself in an infinite variety of other qualities. It is discoverable literally everywhere and in everything. *All possible activities* can then come to be seen as ways to satisfy the desire to "murder," and hence, although still capable of his original "literal" murder, he will no longer be compelled to seek his satisfaction of that impulse in *only* that way. "Expanded" or "thoroughgoing" murder in a Tiantai context means a transformation from literal murder to metaphorical murder, or the realization that literal murder had always already been metaphorical to begin with, the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical being just what Tiantai epistemology seeks to demolish.

Here again we have no room to hope for any total solution. For in theory there would still be some improbable but imaginable circumstances in which "literal" murders could take place. However, it is important to note that these circumstances would be so astronomically rare as to be statistically insignificant, as long as the force of the obsession were no longer in effect in its original narrow form. In 99.99999 percent of occasions, the un-eradicated drive to murder would be more easily and directly satisfiable through a non-literal form of murder, of which there are an infinitely greater number than the single form delusively regarded as "literal" by the murderer before his Tiantai studies. It is as if someone felt compelled to obey a mysterious inner directive to wear fried eggs on his head because he believed this alone would make him look dignified. When the identities of "egg" and "head" are exploded in the Tiantai manner—"egg," it turns out, cannot help but mean "any object," and "head" turns out to mean "any part of the body"—he would come to see that the compulsory directive he had previously been interpreting to mean this, and only this (though still fully present and still absolutely compulsory), actually meant, say, "wear some object somewhere on your body," and could be satisfied in all sorts of less cumbersome ways. We can assume he would choose, in 99 percent of cases, these less cumbersome ways to fulfill his desire, simply because it requires less effort and brings fewer undesired consequences, still in terms of his own desires rather than some extrinsic standard. We can assume he would fulfill his desire in ways that would bring him fewer things that he himself does not desire, like effort and punishment (unless those were what he desired, in which case the same Tiantai deconstruction and expansion would have to be applied to the identities of "effort" and "punishment" rather than to that of "murder"; he would learn to discover *them* everywhere). While there would be nothing to prevent him from sometimes wearing fried eggs on his head, and indeed he could still fulfill his directive by doing so—and while there might even conceivably be occasions, within some strange communities, when this alone would be necessary for his dignity (difficult though they might be to imagine)—these occasions would certainly be very rare. The *motivation* for this action has been removed, which is the only truly efficient way to keep it from recurring with regularity.

Applying this structure to the case at hand, let us assume that Hitler learned this system of thought, and some part of him embraced it and practiced it while another part of him retained its prior undiminished lust for some specific thing, like world domination or genocide. The goal of his practice, then, would be to learn to satisfy that desire simply by shaking hands or eating breakfast, thus satisfying it *more* (on more occasions, with easier availability, and with greater articulations and variety of contents) and in a way that conflicted less with the contrary desires of other parts of himself and with the desires of other sentient beings. Of course even this practice would be arduous and would be subject to the same vicissitudes of progress and backsliding as we tend to see in any Buddhist practitioner or self-cultivator, or indeed anyone trying to change his own habitual ways of thinking and acting.

But that's still the easy case, where some part of Hitler himself accepts the moral view and the total Tiantai system of thought and simply struggles to apply it to the rest of his "self." Now let us turn to a different but related question: how would an advocate of Tiantai doctrine, himself perhaps free of the desire for genocide, "deal with" Hitler in a case where Hitler himself does not embrace any of these Tiantai or general Buddhist views about compassion and liberation? But of course there is considerable sleight of hand involved in asking a theorist of any kind, "How would you have dealt with Hitler?" The key qualifications are left out of this way of posing the question. Hitler of what year? How much would I know about what would subsequently transpire? Having what degree of influence, and in what form? Is the question, "How would a near-omniscient bodhisattva, magically transported back in time to 1939, have dealt with Hitler?" Or to 1929? Or 1919?

Tiantai writers have no hesitation in sometimes allowing even for murder of evil dictators as a species of compassionate bodhisattva action. Zhili's comments on the story of King Anala from the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* are a rather startling example. In the original story the king had displayed all sorts of cruel punishments of prisoners to his people, but in the end he reveals that these are mere magic-show displays of violent punishment to frighten and correct the populace. The victims were not real living creatures, but mere stage effects. Zhili goes so far as to assert that, while in this particular case it was all a magic show, in some cases

a bodhisattva can perform real violence on the bodies of sentient beings to prevent greater violence, assuming the near-omniscience required to make this judgment. So the strenuous use of force to combat evil is one way Tiantai doctrine might address this problem. This is another consequence of Tiantai upāya theory, presupposing a somewhat mythical degree of omniscience of future acts and consequences but well supported by Mahāyāna literature. Hence, far from implying that one must not fight evil, however conceived, since it is identical to the good, Tiantai theory can at times be almost shockingly gung-ho about doing so.

This particular type of Tiantai response (one of many possibilities, as we shall see) to the "what to do about Hitler" question, then, would seem on the surface very much like the response that might be given by the most axiologically dualistic moral fundamentalist: eradicate the evil and promote the good, by any means necessary. But the difference is that Tiantai theory recognizes that the fighting of evil is itself inevitably an evil—one that is, like all other evils, licit and to be encouraged in certain circumstances. In this view any notion that we could keep our hands clean in the fight against evil—that any possible struggle against Hitler, from the Gandhian to the Churchillian, would not involve us in various ways in being little Hitlers ourselves—is pernicious self-deception. If, as bodhisattvas, we decide to murder Hitler to save millions of lives, we are, like Hitler, dehumanizing our opponent, seeing his life as expendable in the interest of a greater good, objectifying him and propagandizing him abstractly so as to take heed of only certain of his aspects and not others, claiming the wisdom and right to decide the life and death of others, and so on. Even if we employ passive resistance, we would have to be morally obtuse not to see that this also involves a sort of passive-aggressive violence—a desire to infuriate, humiliate, and shame the other, to inflict our will upon him—and a display of our own superior strength and moral fiber that can serve our megalomaniacal vanity. All of these qualities are essential to what makes Hitler Hitler, but we cannot fight Hitler without them. To fight Hitler by being Hitler is, in fact, one way Hitlerism's own interpenetration with the good is made manifest—that is, by revealing that Hitler is "more than just Hitler *simpliciter*"—and in fact necessarily implies his own overcoming, if "fully expressed" in the Tiantai sense.

The concern here is with the question of what motivates this strenuous resistance to a perceived evil. Perhaps if everyone accepted the Tiantai premise that Hitler need not abandon his own value commitment, but merely expand it, there would be no reason for the Allies to oppose him nor for conscientious objectors within the Reich to resist the implementation of the Final Solution. Instead, they might say, "Well, in any case, what Hitler is doing is his own form of bodhisattva practice; let him continue; who am I to judge him?" But the fallacy in such a statement is the assumption that either the Allied nations or the conscientious objectors were beginning with a blank slate, that they began with no value commitments or propensities of their own. The Tiantai position is not that I must abandon my own value commitment and instead adopt Hitler's. It is that every sentient being starts where he is and in all cases already has some implicit value commitment (which is always a partial conventional truth) that can be more or less fully developed but that always has its origins in the biased, self-interested perspective of that being. A bodhisattva has seen that his original interest in his own personal freedom from suffering came to entail the saving of all sentient beings. He is free to work toward that end. Were the Allies motivated by disinterested, objective concern for goodness or by some expanded, more developed form of self-interest? The point is that the former has come to be seen as an aspect of the latter, to be interpenetrative with it.

A conscientious objector resists because doing so is consistent with his own value system, whatever it might be; a righteous Christian objector, for example, upon conversion to the form of Tiantai we are discussing, would not abandon his commitment to dichotomous Christian values any more than Hitler would abandon his commitment to genocide. In both cases these objectors would simply recontextualize, expand, and develop their initial beliefs. This would not entail the abandonment of the (delusional) effort to resist any more than it would entail the abandonment of the (delusional) effort to kill the Jews and Roma and homosexuals. It would simply allow this effort to branch out into alternate forms and methods of expressing itself until it reached the point where its original hard-and-fast meanings and denotations had collapsed into undecidability and interpenetration.

It is true that when thoroughgoing insight into interpenetration is reached, this effort to resist could in some circumstances take the form precisely of total compliance. But the point is that this compliance would never be unilateral, total, or compulsively "self-natured"; it would be compliance that always carried within it the ability to transform back into explicit resistance at the crucial moment. Furthermore, if both Hitler and the resister achieved full interpenetration, their murder of each other would no longer have to entail literal murder. It would be coextensive with their mutual acceptance and tolerance, which in this view would be the only real solution of the problem at its roots: the elimination of the necessity and *motivation* for mutual extermination, not because it is no longer wanted (because, taking a realistic view, we can be confident that such aggressive notions will likely tend to be regenerated, and in the Tiantai view they are actually hardwired into the nature of reality itself), but because alternate "metaphorical" means have been found for its satisfaction. While shaking hands, each would be sure he was "murdering" the other in so doing, but by the same token, the murderousness of murder would be effaced, as it is pervaded by, identical to, mutual acceptance.

But this "kill Hitler" approach is applicable only when no other alternative is available and is rendered rather moot when considering the actual ethical choices confronting us mortal agents, in that it is justified only by a superhuman degree of both power and wisdom, which in ordinary life none of us can claim to have. Knowing that Hitler would carry out such evils, the bodhisattva might zap him in advance and, if necessary, suffer the unpleasant karmic consequences himself. But what would a sincere but very human Tiantai thinker say to Hitler if he had met the latter as, say, a hotheaded rabble-rouser in 1923, or even after he had come to power in 1933? If persuasion rather than force were to be used, as is usually the preferred method in Tiantai and most other forms of Buddhism, what would be the approach to be taken? Assuming, then, that one is going to speak to Hitler at all, rather than simply slitting his throat, what should one say? The primary Tiantai answer is not, "You don't have to discard your tendency to kill all Jews and Roma and homosexuals; instead, let me show you an even more effective way, a universalized and metaphoricized way, of doing so that will satisfy this

desire equally well," such as a practitioner might address to himself and his own persistent obsessions. Yet neither would it be the more conventional, "Listen, you've got it all wrong; what you are proposing is evil and must be stopped." Here we are in the realm of motivational psychology rather than ethics as such, but the point is still worth discussing.

The Tiantai approach to moral persuasion rests on the premise that no one can be persuaded to adopt a new object of desire except through appeal to some preexisting desideratum, some value to which he is already committed, that can serve to motivate him. This premise, I think, is uncontroversial. We never begin with a blank slate; all interlocutors come to the table with some set of values or desiderata already in place. Now, perhaps Hitler has some other, more ultimate, desideratum than the extermination of the Jews; perhaps that is only an instrumental value to him, useful to obtaining what he really wants—whether that is world domination; German glory; a psychological sense of justification, importance, or revenge; or perhaps even the Platonic good. In that event, of course, we could try to make a case for separating the ultimate from the instrumental good and talk him into abandoning the latter, the better to obtain the former. This is, again, the traditional Buddhist approach: what you really want ultimately is freedom from suffering, which is what motivates your present course of action. However, your method of achieving this goal is unskillful, based on mistaken premises, doomed to failure; here's a better way of getting what you (really) want. It is in this context that we can imagine taking the second of the two alternatives outlined above: "This killing of the Jews you propose is evil—that is, unskillful; that is, it creates suffering for yourself and others, does not really obtain your real desideratum, and is based on wholly erroneous premises. Ceasing to do so will, oddly enough, actually achieve what you had hoped to achieve by doing so: the eradication of your own suffering."

It would be wonderful if this were a reliably effective form of moral persuasion. Sometimes it is. But in the vast majority of cases, it is not, and I think it is reasonable to assume that it would have been utterly ineffectual in the case of Hitler. May we not assume that Hitler was well aware that some people existed who did not share his conviction that the Jews were the root of all evil and had to be eliminated? Or that his method was the best means to achieve the amelioration of the world? We must

assume a systematic fusion of ultimate value and this non-negotiable instrumental value in Hitler's case—systematic because it already had its own ideological antibodies: anyone voicing an opposed opinion was thereby convicted of having been infected by insidious Jewish propaganda, decadence, racial inferiority, or weakness of the will. So for the sake of this discussion let us assume that after a certain point no possible argument could have dislodged Hitler's anti-Semitism. We must accept it as an unchangeable initial condition for the task before us. What then?

The Tiantai approach to this situation has precedents in the Confucian tradition, from which, I think, it is partially derived. We may consider here Mencius's response to King Xuan of Qi when the latter pleaded incompetence to be a true king on the basis of his consuming lust for wealth, heroics, and sex.[3] Rather than asking him to discard these propensities, Mencius accepted them as a premise, the desiderata in appeal to which a new desideratum had to be established. This could be done only by expanding the range of meaning of these desiderata, to the point where their enjoyment is shared with others, on the premise that doing so would secure a more robust enjoyment of them for the king himself, just as, Mencius argues elsewhere, one enjoys the pleasure of music more intensely when it is shared. Mencius asked the king not to eliminate his lusts, but to enlarge them: "You must lust for wealth and sex to such a degree that you can't bear to see anyone without them—and indeed, your own possession of these desires is what allows you to empathize effectively with the similar desires of others; your lust for heroics must be so intense that you cannot stand to have any wrong unrighted in your kingdom."

In the Tiantai case this general "reversal through expansion" approach is supplemented by the further Buddhist attention to the question of self-nature, to the identity of the putative objects, the meaning of the original terms, allowing them to break up into a "moving army of metaphors," a tissue of tropes. This is the utility of the Buddhist concern with the question of self-nature. What is sex, after all? What is wealth? Upon examination these entities turn out to have no self-nature, to be composed entirely of something-elses. To want them is to want something other than them. Turning back to Hitler, and assuming for the sake of argument that his anti-Semitism is sincere and not mere propa-

ganda, the only way to approach the problem would be to say, "What is a Jew? What is a Roma? What is a homosexual? What is a Slav? What is murder? What is world-domination? What is racial supremacy? What is the Reich? What is triumph of the will?" Assuming that his beliefs *about* all these things are unchangeable, we must work on the meanings of the objects of these beliefs, showing their metaphoricity, expanding the range of their connotations to the point of altering their denotations.

For example, the symbol "Jew" for Hitler may have many delusional connotations: evil parasite, defiler of the purity of blood, exploiter of the innocent, conspirator against the good, or inventor of race-weakening universal moral ideals. If these delusional meanings can be expanded to the point where they are seen everywhere, even in Hitler's own attempt to fight them, where the paranoid obsession with Jewish influence reaches its zenith, the nature of the case will have changed decisively. If Hitler can expand his delusion enough to come to see the idea of amelioration of human civilization through the dominance of superior races (one of his stated goals) as a vast Jewish conspiracy, or German nationalism as itself a devious ploy created by the Jews, or the concept of the national borders he wants to expand as a legalistic Jewish imposition on pastoral Aryan purity and natural relations to the land (or, conversely, his "blood and soil" ideology as a version of a twisted Zionist delusion), or all general ideas, including his own racial idealism, as a descendent of what he regards as Jewish moral universalism, he can come to see his own project as itself a case of being an unwitting dupe of Jewish cunning. In that case, in making himself a more extreme anti-Semite, in a certain sense making himself even more deluded than before, he will have to abandon his original form of struggle against the Jews. Perhaps he can be made to believe that by martyring the Jews he will be contributing to their power, or that his interest in the "master race" shows his contamination by the Jewish invention of the concept of race as derivative from the concept of "chosen people."

These are just random examples to give a general idea of what we have in mind here; the actual range and content of these delusional and casuistic connections would depend on the ingenuity—one almost wants to say audacity—of the bodhisattva on the case. One must try to shift Hitler's attention from the literal Jew to some metaphorical Jew—the

delusional Christian anti-Semitic trope of the unredeemed "Jew" within one's own heart, for example. When he rants about the master race, we must take an even more fanatically Nazi position from which to chide him: "You are talking like a Jew! Struggle against this Jewish idea that has infected you!" However unlovely all of this may sound to Jewish ears (including my own), this is what we have to work with and is the lesser evil. We cannot simply dream this anti-Semitism away; it existed, it exists—it will continue to exist. The question again is what to do with it. Can a constructive use, or at least harmless outlet, be found for it? In the short term, assuming we cannot eradicate this delusion, we might be able to neutralize the harm of the delusional belief by diffusing it, by expanding it, by diversifying it, by complicating it.

But more importantly and more radically, in the long run, if Hitler continues his practice in this way and really "succeeds" in it in this nonliteral way, there is room in Tiantai to see him as thereby becoming "the genocidal racist bodhisattva." This is hard to swallow but needs to be understood carefully. Such a bodhisattva would be someone for whom the word "Jew" and the initial delusional commitment to the Jews' extermination would still be ineradicable and axiomatic, but the meaning of this word would have changed to the point where his praxis, and indeed the significance of his words and concepts, was genuinely indistinguishable from the wisdom and compassion of a Buddha. This would provide a means of preaching to and converting all future anti-Semites in their own language. "Jew" would now mean precisely greed, anger, and delusion, self-view, non-interpenetration, and so forth; "exterminate" would mean liberate (not only liberation from, but liberation of), and so on. But the key point is that a Tiantai bodhisattva would see these "evils"—greed, anger, and delusion—to be identical with Buddhahood, in accordance with precisely this Tiantai doctrine of the interpenetration of good and evil. Hence for this Hitler-bodhisattva the word "Jew" would have come to be synonymous with the word "Buddha" by way of its identity with "devil."

Zhili had stipulated that "outside of the devil there is no Buddha, outside of the Buddha there is no devil" (*mowaiwufo fowaiwumo* 魔外無佛, 佛外無魔).[4] Hitler becomes a Tiantai bodhisattva by "succeeding" in "murdering the Jews" in the Tiantai sense: he succeeds if and only if

this comes to mean for him, "To be a Jew is to be the Buddha: there is no Buddhahood outside Jewishness, no Jewishness outside Buddhahood." The "evil" Jewry, seen in its fully nonself-natured, Three Truths intersubsumptive form, is precisely inclusive of, productive of, and ultimately identical to the highest good, Buddhahood, and vice versa. The point is that this does not require eliminating the original baseless association of the word "Jew" with "devilishness," but rather its Tiantai expansion into *universal* deviltry. Indeed, the ridiculous anti-Semitic claims of near-universal Jewish devilish power can be put to good use here in overcoming themselves; a small further tweaking from fatuous universality to true universality succeeds in completely reversing their meaning, revealing that precisely in this universal devilishness Jewishness is real Buddhahood. For *universal* deviltry, precisely through its universality, its unconditionality, is also Buddhahood.

A concrete human being who called himself a Jew would perhaps be, for this "genocidal racist bodhisattva," simultaneously (as Tiantai epistemology requires) an unfortunate suffering sentient being *and* a heroic fellow bodhisattva taking on the form of a hell-being for the sake of the liberation of all creatures. If pressed, of course, the Tiantai bodhisattva would have to say that "Jew" is just a metaphor—there is no such thing as a Jew, even in the case of the concrete human being. For like all things, according to the Three Truths, the Jew is something of which there is ultimately no such thing (Emptiness), is an embodiment of one-sided delusions and attachments (provisional) and is heroic bodhisattva and manifestation of omnipresent Buddhahood, the full presence of the Absolute itself (the Center), all three of which are intersubsumptive and ultimately synonymous. One could just as legitimately use the term "Christian," "Buddhist," "Spaniard," or "plumber" to designate greed, anger, and delusion—and likewise to designate Buddhahood—for indeed all of these terms are interpenetrative and end up meaning one another. He would retain this particular designation, however, to communicate with a certain type of sentient being with whom he has a special karmic connection because of his own past commitment to this particular delusional one-sided mode of speech and thought.

We have a situation here that somewhat resembles the usurping of Jewish identity accomplished by Christian theology, and many other

violently far-fetched figurations and symbolizations of "Jew" in the history of Europe, and it will perhaps feel just as offensive. A strong case can be made that the attachment of a symbolic or metaphysical meaning, positive or negative, to a particular ethnic group is generally a subtle and insidious form of racism. Anti-Semitism and philo-Semitism are two sides of the same coin, easily transmutable into each other. Nonetheless, there may be some particularly stubborn cases of ingrained delusion in which this is the least of several evils. If it is true that prejudice in one form or another will always exist (and on Tiantai premises this statement is undeniable; prejudice, like all other entities that have once occurred, is inherent in the Absolute and, once it has occurred even one time, is always present, if only "in the form of" the past, relinquished racism of our forefathers, which remains present to us as something that must be incorporated into each new present moment), then this peculiarly structured form of racism, anti-Semitism that can at least serve the ends of philo-Semitism, is the best of a bad situation. In that case the specific skills, methods, and procedures necessary for this intersubsumption would be something we would do well to maintain and cultivate even if we thought racial prejudice had temporarily vanished, in preparation for its inevitable resurfacing.

It is a psychological truism that certain kinds of benevolence are rooted in reaction formations to a violent hatred and envy, and we must think of bodhisattva activity in the same way. Singer-songwriter Randy Newman's satires of racial prejudice are a good example of this: they contain, and probably spring from, the nagging presence of a virulent racism—perhaps a part of the his own psyche that he recognizes and then deals with, one of those stubborn subselves of which we are all comprised—but this is precisely what provides them with their power in serving to undermine racism. We might also think of those American evangelical Christians who fervently await the judgment day when all the non-Christians will be sent to their damnation yet staunchly support Jewish interests in Israel in order to hasten the arrival of that day. Given the resistance of these prejudices to more thorough dissolution, these are ways to perhaps at least limit their damage and turn some of their energy to a contrary result.

Understandably, as a Jew, or as a member of another positively or negatively fetishized racial group, we may wish to say, "Stop projecting your own meshugga metaphysics on me, and recognize me for what I am: not a symbol of pure evil, or pure goodness, but a human being, an individual!" We want hermeneutic rights over ourselves, the right not to have alien interpretations of our being foisted upon us. But, unfortunately, this is probably asking too much. It may not delight us to hear the whoops of laughter of onlooking strangers when we trip and fall down the stairs, but do we really have a right to demand that what is tragic for ourselves cannot be comic for others? Compassion demands commiseration with the victims of tragedy and a capacity to see and feel as they do, but must this also exclude an ability to see and feel otherwise as well? Might the one not imply the other? And is a world utterly devoid of schadenfreude really desirable? In any case, according to Tiantai premises, it is not even really thinkable, for both compassion and schadenfreude are just particular species of the ability to see, think, and feel any given thing *otherwise*, to recontextualize, which is, in this view, what it means to be a sentient being.

We are all seen as well as seeing, objects as well as subjects, partial as well as whole, and we cannot help being symbols of various kinds for one another. All of these significances we carry are inevitably one-sided, biased, unfair. By the same token, it is a consequence of nonself and Emptiness doctrine that sentient beings are not always masters of themselves; that they are not autonomous, transparent, unconditioned souls; that there is much about themselves that they cannot directly control with their wills. We may find all sorts of strange monsters swimming around in the soup of our habits and prejudices, which are as much a part of our "selves" as the prettier creatures there. Most forms of Buddhism prescribe means for gradually starving or discarding these monsters, but Tiantai is unique among Buddhist schools in asserting that, as a consequence of its expansion of the Emptiness doctrine into the Three Truths and what this implies about any form of ultimate control, these monsters cannot be annihilated even for a Buddha. They can only be redirected, reinterpreted, recontextualized, made into servants and exemplars of the good, which is made possible precisely by *their* Emptiness

as a supplement to the Emptiness of the selves that contain them, the ambiguity of their putative identities and the susceptibility to rereading that this entails.

What we are better advised to hope for, then, is not the utopian dream of eliminating all prejudice, but rather the development of a multifariousness of symbolic valence that annuls the restricting power of the fetishized identification. To exist is to be misunderstood, snap-judged, unjustly categorized. Our hope is to expand every snap judgment so that it is seen to have included all other judgments, hence annulling its one-sided character, because we must not shrink from perhaps the most offensive consequence of the Tiantai view: all racial prejudices are, in the sense we have outlined above, "true." That is, if all putative characteristics are discoverable in all putative objects, the claim that "the ethnic group X has the negative characteristics a, b, and c (rapaciousness, stupidity, greed, laziness, what have you)" cannot fail to be true.

What is wrong with this claim is not the claim that all X-people are a, b, and c, but three further unspoken premises that absolutize this partial truth: first, that they are a, b, and c *because* they are X; second, that their being a, b, and c excludes their being equally non-a, non-b, and non-c; and, third, that every other group is not equally a, b, and c. We may add that the easily refuted premise that micro level and macro level have the same characteristics, which is precisely the first target of Buddhist deconstruction: what is abstractly called a self, validly for some contexts, is composed of elements each of which, considered on its own, completely lacks the quality of self; similarly, a group that as a whole is smart or stupid or lazy or industrious need not be composed of members who are themselves smart or stupid or lazy or industrious—not all of them, and indeed, more radically, possibly not even any one of them. A macro-level triangle can be made entirely of micro-level circles. The advantage of accepting the strange Tiantai reconfiguration is not at all negligible, for it addresses one of the most insidious effects of racism: the subtle infiltration of racist stereotypes into the minds of the members of the very groups it targets.

A member of group X, upon hearing it said that X's possess characteristic a, is put in an impossible double bind. Looking within, he either discovers or does not discover some explicit example of quality a. If he

does not discover it in himself, he finds himself with the burden of trying to disprove the stereotype and obliged to exaggeratedly avoid any behavior that smacks of quality a. If he does discover it in himself, he is in danger of collusion with the stereotype, self-hatred, an attempt to either defiantly accentuate it or fearfully disguise it. Either way, he has been infected by the stereotype, forced to compensate for or deny himself. The advantage of the Tiantai view is that he can then recognize and accept himself in whatever form he finds himself. It is no longer a problem for him to say either, "Yep, I, this X-person, certainly am a, b, and c," or, "No, I swear, no a, b, or c here!" For these interpenetrate; my a-ness and my non-a-ness are alternate forms that express each other. The found presence or absence of either one can never prove my "self-nature" as "an X who is a." In spite of the undeniable presence of a-ness in me, an X, I am not trapped by my a-ness or my X-ness nor obliged to deny or suppress either. And the same is true for the members of other groups, most obviously for those who are making the attribution of characteristic a to group X, for the attribution of a is itself an expression of one's a-ness.

The metaphoricization of racist tropes is admittedly a dangerous business, and I have already noted that I too believe it would be nicer for everyone if the other path—say, the indiscriminate teaching of racial equality and education in freeing the mind of all prejudices—could expect to meet with success in most cases. The danger lies in how this form of metaphoricizing, even if it is meant as a local solution to a particularly tightly woven prejudice at a particular time and place, becomes part of a discourse for public consumption, applied throughout history in other contexts. I think it is probably true that both the villainized symbolic "Jew" of the Gospel of John and the idealized symbolic "Jew" of the Pauline epistles ("circumcision of the heart" and so on) have contributed equally to perpetuating anti-Semitism. The same may be said of Marx's notorious essay "On the Jewish Question," where "Jew" is metaphoricized to mean "capitalist" instead of the concrete Jewish people as such. One could give Marx the benefit of the doubt and see this as an attempt to diffuse a preexisting anti-Semitism by turning its symbolic energies toward capitalism. However, it cannot be denied that it served to perpetuate a particular stereotype about the Jews, which, given the canonical status this text later assumed—and the same can be said of the New

Testament texts just mentioned—came to infect many later generations, even communities who may originally have had no special opinion about any of these matters. In such cases it is hard not to feel that it would have been preferable—assuming again the premise that these writers were actually trying to eliminate anti-Semitism, which is admittedly highly questionable—to practice a kind of Rortyan "changing of the subject" rather than engaging these prejudices in any way, simply letting them lie untouched like an old scab and instead disseminating new symbolic forms that might one day take their place.

On the other hand, it is at least arguable that ignoring the problem, while allowing this particular manifest content to fade out eventually due to lack of renewed interest, would allow exactly the same structures to remain unchanged, to be recreated in other ways, though perhaps with different protagonists and objects. That would bring a constant stream of new pariah groups always regarded and treated in more or less the same ways, since the deadlock of racism had never been truly exploded from within, as, by our present hypothesis, can only be done via such a metaphoric self-expansion. History would be a parade of the same forms of caste oppressions, the same systematic sequestering, scapegoating, and bullying of outcaste groups, with only the names of the protagonists changing in each time and place. The obsessive focus on a few particular groups over long spans of cultural transmission can be seen, perhaps, as a way of getting at the root of the more general problem of racism or prejudice itself, a case of invasive surgery to extricate a tumor rather than an aspirin to relieve the headache the tumor causes.

Be that as it may, it must be observed that the damage here comes from an unskillful and indiscriminate reapplication of a provisional truth into new contexts, where it is allowed to serve as an absolute truth. In a text for public consumption, a trope such as Marx's, if composed by a Tiantai bodhisattva, would have to be carefully girded in hypotheticals and conditionals: *if* you mean by Jew such and such, the "Jewish question" can be solved only by eliminating capitalism, because the only ones who fit that definition are not those you now call the Jews, but you capitalist anti-Semites yourself. This is a bit closer to Nietzsche's approach to anti-Semitism—that is, the adoption of the anti-Semitic premise—but with the proviso that in reality it is you, you Christian

anti-Semites, who are the true "Jews" in the sense you mean it. Of course none of this applies directly to the Hitler question as we are discussing it here; in that case, as in all of these cases, the ideal Tiantai bodhisattva we are constructing would have to be careful not to allow private communications used in the attempt to metaphoricize Hitler's anti-Semitism for Hitler himself, using a particular set of metaphorical tropes, aimed at a particular heuristic or persuasive goal, to stand as general statements of theory released for public consumption. Unleashed from their very specific context, they could become extremely dangerous. Hence it would be a necessary condition of their effectiveness that they would somehow come with an esoteric pomp that could enforce a kind of *Mission: Impossible* self-limitation: "This message will self-destruct in ten seconds!" or "Destroy after reading!" Just how in the world this could be accomplished in any given case is, I'm afraid, yet another test of ingenuity faced by our dauntless Tiantai bodhisattva!

A further issue now comes into view: not "How should one have dealt with Hitler," but the very different question of "How should we deal with the memory of the Holocaust now?" This is another question entirely, and here too I would like to start by asking, What are the available alternatives? The issue presumably concerns how we are to treat the memory of the dead, how we are to educate future generations about what happened, what attitude we are to take to the fact that it happened at all, for the Tiantai view of evil would emphatically *not* imply that we should say to the families of a Holocaust victim, "Stop your whining; it may look bad to you, but really the murder of your family was the setup to an excellent punch line, enlightenment, so you really ought to be happy about it." Here we must distinguish the omnicentric position from the unicentric position, because in the unicentric holist position, which I see as typical of, say, Augustinian theodicy, it would indeed be reasonable to say to a sufferer of any kind, "It looks bad to you, but your perspective is false; the truth is the whole, the God's-eye view, and from that perspective it's all very, very good indeed, all part of the master plan." The point of the setup/punch line paradigm is rather that each perspective serves as a punch line to every other perspective, not that anyone, even that of the whole or of enlightenment, is to be privileged,

thereby reducing the status of some other point of view to mere setup status, to mere illusion. This is indeed the entire thrust of the Tiantai upāya theory.

So first, to the question "What could redeem the Holocaust?" I answer: in some form and to some degree, lots and lots of things, all the time, in all sorts of ways, over and over—for example, seeing a film of Hitler on TV and finding it vaguely entertaining; this "redeems" the Holocaust for that particular late-night History Channel viewer for those few seconds. I am not being entirely facetious with this example, although obviously I am deliberately choosing an excessively trivial case in order to better make this point, which is that this particular experience of "redemption" is manifestly far from final, far from privileged, far from in any way eradicating the increased horror of the opposite perspective, of the concentration camp victim whose tragedy is inevitably being trivialized into amusing footage for millions of other perspectives and moments throughout the future of sentient experience. Each of these is a "punch line" to the other, and this is precisely the manner in which they "interpenetrate." This is, I would claim, just the way it is and something that has to be dealt with; all moments, all perspectives, incorporate, integrate, reinterpret, utilize, and recontextualize one another. The moral question is, How shall we deal with this fact? Denying that it happens will not do. Chuckling at a Hitler film is one way of recontextualizing the Holocaust, one that itself stands eternally open to further recontextualizations. The question is not how to redeem the Holocaust, for no matter what attitude we take to it, we are in some way "redeeming" it—always unsatisfactorily, partially, biasedly. Even if we say, "There can be no redemption for it; it is pure evil and it is an insult to the victims to try to attribute any positive effects to it; all we can do is make sure it never happens again," this is itself a way of recontextualizing, utilizing, redeeming the fact that it has happened—and again, a very meager and unsatisfactory redemption it is. It is not that there can be no redemption of the past, but that we cannot help redeeming—recontextualizing—the past, in terms of whatever values and desiderata happen to be holding sway at the present moment, however frivolous and fleeting. The past is always being callously cannibalized by the present, pillaged for whatever uses the present can find for it.

But the question before us now is, What would be the most skillful recontextualizations available if one were a Tiantai Buddhist bent on promoting enlightenment in the Tiantai sense? Whatever is proposed we do with the fact that the Holocaust happened, we have the problem of recontextualization on our hands again. How we answer this question depends on what we hope to accomplish with our recontextualizations. Do we want to have a maximum justification for outrage? Do we want to be able to lay blame somewhere? Do we want to prove our own moral superiority? Do we want to ensure that this event is spoken of with a certain degree of indignation? Do we want to eliminate naturalization and comprehension and commensurability of this event? Do we want to provide a comforting metaphysics that explains it away? Do we want to avoid a comforting metaphysics that explains it away? Do we want to promote reconciliation with the fact that this has happened? Do we want to dissuade reconciliation with the fact that this has happened? Do we want to comfort the victims with respect for their unredeemable suffering, or with a grand narrative that manufactures some kind of bright side, or both, or neither? Do we want to learn from it? Do we want to see how it is related to other human activities, including our own? Do we want to avoid seeing how it is related to other human activities, including our own? Do we want to make sure that it never happens again? All of these might be things a bodhisattva, for example, would have a reason to want to do in certain circumstances. How this memory should be treated and how it should be presented to future generations would then depend on which of these goals was before us at any given time.

But let us take the least controversial and probably most frequently useful desideratum: How can we make sure it doesn't happen again? How can we prevent future Hitlers? If we are starting from a blank slate, educating a generation that has no prior commitment to fascism, genocide, anti-Semitism, or indeed to any form of value dualism, education in the Tiantai and even general Mahāyāna principle of the ultimate nonduality of good and evil would perhaps be a good way to deter such ideas from arising. This approach to the dismantling of the deleterious effects of attachment to goodness can be found abundantly even in pre-Tiantai Mahāyāna Buddhism, and it would be the approach Tiantai Buddhists

would very likely adopt for preventative educational purposes in the blank-slate scenario. The idea is that it is the attachment to a dualistic conception of "goodness" and the desire to eradicate evil that has led to the most horrendous evils of the last century. Elaborate, programmatic evils of this kind require a fanatical commitment to some concept of the good and presuppose some concept that at least that good for which one is working—a Jew-free world, a socialist utopia—is in no way interpenetrative with its opposite, the evils we are working so hard to eliminate. It is the moral dualism that was committed to the project of eliminating a self-identified "evil" from the world that makes possible the sustained, systematic, purpose-driven endeavor that accomplishes serious evil like that perpetrated by Hitler or Stalin.

Such effectiveness would be impossible if the very same ideations and impulses in their heads were a blip on the screen, seeming to them sometimes good and sometimes evil, rather than something identified by them programmatically as good and thus fanatically adhered to. Lacking the (arguably Greco-Christian) inheritance of a preexistent schema of mutual exclusivity of good and evil, the war of good versus evil, into which these new definitions of "good" and "evil" could be plugged, the occasional thought that any particular racial group or social class is evil, would be beset by ambiguity, replaced soon enough, due to noncommittal statistical randomness, by the opposite idea, so that neither could be sustained consistently and enduringly enough to create any significant effects in the world. If the inherent mutual entailment of good and evil in the Absolute is understood, there can be no more attempts to redeem the world by purifying it of its evil elements, whatever idiosyncratic or delusional definition might be given to "evil," for it becomes manifest that the latter simply can never be done. On general Buddhist premises, *attachment* is the root of all evil, and that means that attachment to "goodness" is also evil. Various schools have various ways of attacking the roots of this tendency to attachment, as purely ethical cultivation of non-attachment or as theoretical non-dualism that undermines the conceptual premises of attachment, but all Buddhism shares something of this perspective. What made Hitler or Stalin dangerous was not their commitment to evil, but their dogged and fanatical commitment, their attachment, to "good."

But the blank-slate scenario almost never occurs in real life. Usually we confront people who are already to some extent committed to certain ideas and values, and the default form of this "commitment" itself is generally some form of value dualism, strong or weak, that is not so easily dislodged. If these happen to be fascist or genocidal concepts of the good, and they are already firmly in place, a more effective way to deflate them might well be education in a further refinement of this "non-attachment" perspective, the Tiantai idea of how these "goods" interpenetrate with their opposites—how these endeavors to create the "good" bring about "evils," even in terms of their own value systems. This may help dispel the worry that in showing that the evils of the Holocaust were also goods, we would be encouraging a prospective Hitler to think, "Well, even though what I am planning is very evil, there will always be some Tiantai guy around in the future to justify it and prove that it was really also a form of good, so why not just go ahead and do it?" But this is a misconception of what motivates such endeavors. Again, a Hitler does not think what he is doing is evil; he thinks it is good. He is not being insufficiently strict in his opposition to evil, but rather excessively fanatical in his commitment to the good, as he conceives it. The belief in the non-dualism of good and evil thus does not function to eliminate his qualms about the evils he is proposing—most likely he has none, for by definition he regards them as goods—but rather serves to undercut his conviction that what he proposes is unambiguously good, *even according to his own standards*.

Now, we might also imagine a case where someone is thinking, "Gee, I'd really like to do these things—rape, pillage, massacre—but I have to restrain myself, because I know these things are evil." Here it would seem that the belief in the dichotomy between good and evil is the strongest bulwark against the commission of evils. But the problem once again is the lack of thoroughgoingness in the application of the principle. Such a person has not one set of values, but two conflicting sets of values. He believes in one sense that it is good to rape, pillage, and massacre—this is entailed in his "wanting" to do them—and in another sense that it is good to refrain from doing so. If he believes in the value dichotomy applying to one of these sets, he will believe in it for the other as well. It would be disastrous, of course, if the principle of non-duality of good

and evil were applied only to the second set and not the first. But education in Tiantai principles would entail that the same principle be applied for both sets. The person would learn to see not only that "doing the good of refraining from murder is really no different from the evil of not refraining from murder" but also that "doing the good of murdering is really no different from the evil of not-murdering." Once again we must ask what the available alternatives are. Maintenance of the dichotomy of good and evil, for either or both of these sets of conflicting values, will maintain their coexistence and conflict within him. If we can accept the premise that such a conflict causes him pain and that the doomed attempt to escape such pain can lead to all sorts of rash and desperate behaviors, this protracted struggle with himself is one of the strongest possible motivations for the eventual commission of these and other evil acts—as alternating frenzies of self-righteous persecution of oneself and others on the one hand and of defiant self-indulgence on the other—in a futile attempt to break the deadlock. As Nietzsche remarked, the sting of conscience teaches one to sting.

The Tiantai moral theory, with its insistence that the most horrible evils are ineradicable, built into the absolute unchangeable nature of all existence, and fully and eternally present even in Buddhahood, may appear gloomy and discouragingly pessimistic, or, from the other side, in that it affirms the utilizability of these ineradicable evils, absurdly optimistic. But after considering the alternatives, we may feel inclined to say of it what Churchill said of democracy—namely, that Tiantai ethics is indeed the worst possible response to the Holocaust, with the exception of all the others. It may be disheartening to know that Hitler, rabid racism, genocidal rage, and the Holocaust are eternally with us and can never be extirpated from the nature of reality. But this discouragement derives, I think, from a misunderstanding of what "eternally present" means in a Tiantai context. To say of the Holocaust "Never Again," vigilantly and unceasingly, is itself a form of this eternal presence, and in the best-case scenario, this would be the mode in which such evils are forever with us.

EPILOGUE

So Far and Yet So Close

HOW DOES THE WORLD LOOK, THEN, TO A TIANTAI BUDDHIST? Here is Zhiyi's own description in a passage from his magnum opus, the *Mohezhiguan*, presenting in capsule form the totality of his vision as achieved by a particular meditation exercise, the most direct and straightforward one among many presented there, called "The One-Practice Samadhi." It may serve as a fitting final summary of the main ideas discussed in this book:

> This is the Stillness-Awareness [*zhiguan* 止觀, the standard Chinese translation of the Buddhist meditation term *samatha-vipassanā*] of the mind for this practice: sit upright and mindful, eliminating any disturbing sensations, abandoning any unruly ideations. Without thinking about anything else, but also without grabbing hold of any particular forms and appearances, just fix your mind exclusively on the Total Field of All Phenomena,[1] letting each moment of experience be entirely identical to the Total Field of All Phenomena (*xiyuan fajie*, *yinian fajie* 繫緣法界, 一念法界). Fixing the mind on it is the Stillness; letting each moment of experience be entirely identical to it is the Awareness.
>
> Trust that all phenomena without exception are aspects of Buddhahood. As such, none can be prior to or subsequent to any of the others, as there are no longer any genuine boundaries between them. Thus there can be no separate knower or describer of them. But in that case, nothing can be definitively described or known about them. Hence they cannot definitively exist or not exist, cannot be a knower or a non-knower, cannot, for that matter, be known or unknown. Free of the duality of these extremes, they dwell only in their not dwelling exclusively anywhere or in anything, just as the Buddhas dwell in their secure and peaceful Nirvana, the quiescent extinguishment that is itself also the Total Field of All Phenomena.
>
> Do not be alarmed when learning this profound teaching: the Total Field of All Phenomena is called Awakening, but it is also called the Realm

beyond Conception. It is called Liberating Wisdom, but it is also called the Unborn and Undestroyed. In the same way, each and every phenomenon is itself none other than the Total Field of All Phenomena, without duality and without separation. Do not be alarmed in learning of this non-duality and non-separateness.

To be able to contemplate in this way is to contemplate the [true meaning of the] Ten Epithets of the Tathāgata [i.e., of the Buddha].[2] In thus contemplating the Tathāgata, do not regard the Tathāgata as the Tathāgata. There is no definite Tathāgata available anywhere to be the Tathāgata, nor is there any definite Tathāgata-wisdom with which he might know himself, for between the Tathāgata and his wisdom there is no attribute of duality, of motion, of beginning. They are neither in space nor lacking in any part of space; neither in past-present-future nor lacking in any past-present-future, neither dual nor non-dual, neither defiled nor pure.

This contemplation of the Tathāgata is most rare, like space itself never going awry. Keep increasing your mindfulness of it, seeing the beautiful features of the Buddha in front of you as if you were looking at your own reflection in still water. First see it as this one Buddha, then as all the Buddhas of the ten directions. No miraculous power need take you far away to see these Buddhas: you see them and hear them preaching the Dharma right where you are. Understanding the real meaning of the phrase "how things really are," you can, for the sake of all sentient beings, see the Tathāgata, but without taking hold of the idea of "Tathāgata" as a definite thing. You transform the lives of all sentient beings and move them toward Nirvana, but without taking hold of the idea of "Nirvana" as a definite thing. You beautify yourself for the sake of all sentient beings but see there to be no definite thing that is "beauty."

It is very remarkable indeed: having no definite form or attribute, and thus no seeing or hearing or knowing, [the Total Field of All Phenomena] admits of no realization, even by a Buddha. What is the reason? It is that a Buddha is himself precisely the Total Field of All Phenomena. To say that the Total Field of All Phenomena has a realization of the Total Field of All Phenomena would be contentious and meaningless talk. Rather, without any realization or any attainment, contemplate all the aspects of all sentient beings as aspects of Buddhahood, and contemplate the extent of the realm of sentient beings as the extent of the realm of the Buddha. The extent of the realm of a Buddha is beyond conception, and so is the extent of the realm of a sentient being. The realm of sentient beings dwells as space dwells: by dwelling in nothing at all, by its utter lack of any definite attribute, it dwells within enlightened wisdom itself.

Since we can find no things that are mundane and deluded, what is there to abandon? Since we can find no things that are sagely and pure, what is there to achieve? The same goes for samsara, Nirvana, defilement, and purity. Not abandoning, not obtaining, dwell only in the ultimate reality. In

this way, see each sentient being as the true Buddha, who is the Total Field of All Phenomena.

See lust and rage and delusion and all other afflictive passions and disturbances as actions that are always already quiescent, actions devoid of any real motion, belonging to neither samsara nor Nirvana. Relinquishing neither false views nor the unconditioned, practice the Buddha path, for such a practice is neither practicing the path nor not practicing the path. It is called truly dwelling in each of the afflictive passions and disturbances, seeing each of them to be the Total Field of All Phenomena.

In contemplating heavy karma, none goes beyond the five grave sins of killing father, killing mother, killing an arhat, shedding the blood of a Buddha, or sowing division in the community. But these five grave sins are precisely wisdom itself, for there is no definite mark of duality differentiating wisdom on the one hand and these five sins on the other. There is no separate entity that feels them, knows them, discerns them. The attributes of sin are precisely the attributes of the ultimate reality, for both are beyond conception and thus incapable of being destroyed, originally free of any original nature. All karma and conditionings [both sinful and virtuous] dwell in the ultimate reality, neither coming nor going, neither cause nor effect. This is the contemplation of all karma itself as precisely the authoritative signature of the Total Field of All Phenomena.[3] The authoritative signature of the Total Field of All Phenomena is such that the four types of demon can never destroy it or abuse it. And why? Because the demons are themselves the authoritative signature of the Total Field of All Phenomena. How could the authoritative signature of the Total Field of All Phenomena destroy the authoritative signature of the Total Field of All Phenomena?

The same idea can be applied to each and every phenomenon, as should now be obvious.[4]

It is a stirring vision and well describes the way the world would look to someone who had reached the consummation of Tiantai thinking and practice. It would be a fitting last word to this book. All the most distinctive Tiantai ideas are presented by Zhiyi here in their most direct form. Below are a few of them:

1. Each moment of experience is identical to the totality of all existence as both the entire expanse of all possible contents and as the ground containing and generating these contents.
2. All things are neither the same as nor different from one another.
3. Knower and known are inseparable, which undermines the possibility of any determinate knowledge.

4. This non-knowledge undermines itself in the form of a negation of the negation, so things are not even definitively known as unknowable, reopening the way to the fullness of particular knowledge.
5. All things are aspects of Buddhahood but are also aspects of any other quality chosen at random.
6. Definite determinacy of any kind requires contrast to something genuinely different, but every relation is actually the necessary yet impossible relation of the whole to the whole, which is the reason why it must be said that the Buddha cannot realize the truth (the whole cannot realize the whole) but also that the demons cannot destroy the truth or be destroyed by it (the whole cannot destroy the whole), as well as that evil karma and afflictions cannot hinder enlightenment (the whole cannot hinder the whole), and equally that enlightenment cannot eliminate or transcend evil karma and afflictions (the whole cannot eliminate or transcend the whole), such that deluded beings are Buddhas and Buddhas are deluded beings.

In one sense this "One-Practice Samadhi" is really just a deliberate continuous reassertion of its one simple article of faith: "trust that all experiences without exception are aspects of Buddhahood" (literally, "believe that all dharmas are Buddha-dharmas" [*xin yiqiefa shi fofa* 信一切法是佛法]). At first hearing this may seem like a familiar pantheistic idea, a claim of omnipresence of the highest being similar to that asserted in some forms of Hinduism (Brahman is everything), Daoism (Dao is everything), and even, in a sense, in monotheism (God's presence is everywhere). But it is important to see that what is being presented here is something quite different from the belief that "all things are in some sense divine," or "all things are God's will," or even, say, a more thorough pantheist belief that "all things are themselves inalienable aspects of the divine Absolute." The main difference lies in the role of delusional human desire and will (in Tiantai they are also included in the Absolute), the role of illusion (it is also included in the Absolute), and the definition of what is highest (it is not a matter of teleology or substance). For in doctrines that claim, "All things are divine," "divine"

generally means *arranged by the highest intelligence*,[5] while "all things" generally means merely *everything that is real rather than an illusion*,[6] and *not including disobedient human will or inaccurate human cognitions*.

In contrast, "All dharmas are Buddha-dharmas" means that all aspects of experience without exception—including all volitions, feelings, and cognitions, and without any escape clause via an appearance/reality dichotomy—are aspects of the experience of the full enlightenment of a Buddha. "Buddha," of course, does not mean "a perfect omnipotent being who creates and wills the world to achieve a consciously preconceived project." In Tiantai context, it means "someone who is liberated from the suffering intrinsic to any possibly encountered objects, from the conditionality of all conceivable determinate being, by realizing the interpenetrating Three Truths, thereby seeing all determinate things as both conditional and unconditional, and compassionately liberating all other beings, now seen to be non-dual with himself and each other, in the same way." To say that all things are an aspect of Buddhahood thus has nothing to do with asserting that they are created to fulfill some particular goal, to be subordinated to a project or a part of a deliberately wrought whole, or to be unilaterally reducible to a metaphysical substance that lies beyond and is deeply unlike the appearance of things. On the contrary, it means absolute sovereignty, in the sense we've discussed, for each and every individual moment of appearance, to any sentient being however deluded, as a result of the exceptionless interpenetration of the Three Truths.

In other words, the assertion of the omnipresence of Buddhahood is nothing more or less than the assertion of the simultaneous inter-omnipresence of all other possible qualities and entities: "All things are Buddha" means "all things are matter, all things are cup, all things are this glimpse of the curtains, all things are divine, all things are evil," and so on ad infinitum. This does mean that "everything is perfect," in the sense that it need not be changed or improved to instantiate the highest imaginable value, because value, in Buddhism, is the end of suffering, which means unconditionality, which means omnipresence. This also means that each thing exists only because it is a full manifestation of what can be called "ultimate reality" (here, however, in the literal sense of being ultimate and being reality—i.e., unsurpassable and inescapably present),

as it would for an especially thoroughgoing faith that everything is divine or is God's will or is a manifestation of God himself.

But in practice none of these God-centric claims follows through on the alleged perfection of the world; they end up claiming either that the vast majority of human volitions and cognitions, immersed as they are in perversity and delusion and disobedience, are excluded from what is divine or willed by God. Or, as in many pantheist doctrines, an appearance/reality dichotomy is used to nullify the exceptionless affirmation implied by the pantheist formula—everything that is real is an aspect of God, then, but whatever is slated for denial or destruction is simply excluded from the category of "realness" and instead relegated to the category of "illusion"; it is not affirmable, because it is not God, because it is not really there. The affirmation of all existence is stated but not followed through on, which often allows such faiths to be used as bulwarks for ideological manipulation instead.[7] The Three Truths are a rejection of precisely these two things: of all subordination of one state to any other state—hence of all teleology—and of any final appearance/reality or truth/falsehood dichotomy.

Seeing all things as component aspects of the state called Buddhahood means nothing more and nothing less than deliberately conducting the thought-experiment of seeing all things through the eyes of an enlightened Buddha, seeing the world—including oneself—as a Buddha sees it, seeing all experiences as aspects of the Buddha's own experience. But a Buddha sees all things as the infinitely multifarious and diverse manifestations of Buddhahood. To see oneself as a Buddha sees one is to see oneself as an aspect of Buddhahood, to see oneself as an experience that is identical to the Total Field of All Phenomena. A Buddha, by hypothesis, sees all things to be non-dual, via the Three Truths: his experience is such that it has no inside versus outside, no self versus other, no now versus then. As such, he sees all things as aspects of himself, of the experience of Buddhahood, as his own body—but a self, a Buddhahood, a body that is intrinsically uncontainable as just one set of experiences, one set of qualities, with nothing either definitively inner or definitively outer. He sees all things, including all of your present experiences, as inseparable, as intersubsumptive, as suffused with Buddhahood. To be suffused with Buddhahood also means to be interpenetrating with all

the Three Thousand, with all moments intersubsuming so that there is no definitive before or after, with no definite boundaries between himself and yourself, or between any particular moment of your greed, anger, and delusion and his experience of bliss and eternity: he experiences your greed, anger, and delusion as Center, as subsuming the universe, including his own states of bliss and wisdom and eternity.

This "faith" thus means simply to do the thought-experiment of imagining what the world would look like to one for whom even a thought-experiment assuming himself to be an unrealizable ideal or fiction, or at best to temporarily entertain the idea of his realness, is itself a full expression of the Total Field of All Phenomena to which he himself is also identical. It is a thought-experiment about how the world would look to someone who makes no distinction between thought-experiments and verified realities, for whom the very presence of any content posited in a thought-experiment is identical to the Total Field of All Phenomena and ineradicable from each and every existence, past, present, and future. The "One-Practice Samadhi" is nothing more and nothing less than to sit down and keep thinking about this. It is to think of the indivisible whole of all experience with each thought or simply as an act of faith, to think of—to bring to mind—what it would mean to be a Buddha who sees one's own present activity of tentatively imagining the possibility of such a being as a Buddha as itself the activity of a Buddha, which as such is omnipresent and eternal.

Traditional Tiantai as a cultural institution offers a multitude of practices—ritual, meditative, philosophical—to deliberately induce the fully lived experience of this vision. Some of these will strike most modern people as hair-raisingly extravagant. For example, Zhiyi's fulsome description of what that transformed vision would be like, quoted above, is part of a specific ritual practice in which this experience is to be deliberately induced as part of what seems a crazed and obsessive self-conditioning of consciousness—a terrifyingly torturous and rigorous meditative practice of "constant sitting." This practice involves going without sleep and without human contact, and doing nothing but this contemplation for ninety consecutive days, facing in the direction of any particular Buddha believed to be anywhere in the cosmos, occasionally chanting that Buddha's name to keep oneself awake and bolster one's

resolve when distraction or fatigue overtake one, during which time the mind is to be deliberately disposed exclusively as described. It is likely that a vanishingly small percentage of people would be willing to actually undertake such a demanding and single-minded procedure, which sounds like a means of torturing oneself to near insanity. And indeed Tiantai tradition would certainly recognize it without hesitation to be a kind of deliberate conditioning of the mind through severe stress, a self-induced peak experience.

In his essay "Mysticism," Bertrand Russell wrote, "From a scientific point of view, we can make no distinction between the man who eats little and sees heaven and the man who drinks much and sees snakes. Each is in an abnormal physical condition, and therefore has abnormal perceptions."[8] If we replace the contentious word "abnormal" with the more neutral "unusual," and replace the causative "therefore" with a merely correlative "concomitantly," we may adopt a similar statement about the self-acknowledged Tiantai account of its own vision, but without the reductive, dismissive implications of Russell's remark—and with the added advantage of being proof against the insinuation that this consideration somehow undermines or refutes its validity.

Readers of the *Mohezhiguan* are sometimes shocked by Zhiyi's cavalier handling of this question of the "reality" of the religious and philosophical visions he describes, but this relaxed approach is simply an instance of how rigorously consistent and thoroughgoing he was in applying his own claims about what realness *is*. There is nothing to worry about here, because the kind of realness Zhiyi cares about, the only one he admits to be possible, is one that is coextensive with its own illusoriness. For example, shortly after the passage quoted above, after describing elaborate mystical visions of Buddhas in all realms and directions, and other fabulous dimensions of realization going along with these visions, he unblinkingly remarks,

> All phenomena are completely unrooted and without ultimate existence, like jewels you delight in owning in a dream, but which you search for in vain upon awakening. That is how we should think about the Buddhas too. Or again, it is like the woman called Sumanā who lived in the town of Śrāvastī. Men took pleasure in merely hearing about her, and then at night they would dream they were having sex with her. Awaking and remembering

> this, they thought, "She didn't come to me, and I didn't go to her, and yet the pleasure was just so, as if we had." One's awareness of the Buddha should be regarded in the same way. It is like a person traveling through a vast swamp, very hungry and thirsty, who dreams of getting hold of some delicious food, but then wakes to find his stomach still empty, and then muses that all phenomena are really like dreams in this way. That is how we should think about the Buddhas and Buddhahood too.[9]

For Zhiyi these experiences of contemplative vision, even and indeed *especially* if they seem empty and unreal afterward, are their own reward, their own goal, their own self-verifying *and self-refuting* revelation.

For Tiantai the self-refutation is just as important as the self-verification, for the two are seen to be aspects of the same thing, two sides of the same coin, which is precisely the core idea of the Three Truths: for any determinate experience to be posited is also for it to be negated, and vice versa. The simultaneous intersubsumption of Emptiness and provisional positing, the intersubsumption of positing by negation and negation by positing, is the Center itself. Contemplative visions, whether of philosophical ideas or of the luminous cosmos of enlightenment or of the presence of the Buddhas of all directions, are like any other experience: "due to causes and conditions." These conditions might be nothing more than (1) possessing a particular type of nervous system that (2) has come in contact with some particular ideas encountered in a book or in someone's speech, but if that alone is insufficient to produce the effect, additional conditions may be added, such as (3) the unusual state of the body in severe ritual practices, in states of stress and deprivation, in extreme distress or exhaustion or desperation. Like anything else, this vision of the cosmos is the product of specific contingent causes and conditions. That's what it means to be conditional, which Buddhists assert is what it means to exist at all as a determinate thing. But after all, to be conditional in this way, says Tiantai, is to be provisionally posited. To be provisionally posited is to be empty. To be empty is to be the Center. To be the Center is to be intersubsumptively present equally everywhere.

This is far from the only method Zhiyi suggests. Indeed, after putting this total vision before us in all of its brazen mind-bogglingness in his masterwork, *Mohezhiguan*, he spends the equivalent of the next thousand or so pages walking us through the contemplation of all other

states, now in the shadow of this glimpse of totality and intersubsumption, as aspects and forms and reverse manifestations of its presence precisely in its absence. We are shown how this preview of the Tiantai universe may now impact our consideration of all other states of mind we might be experiencing: the persistent arising of evils, distractions, pettinesses, illnesses, partialities, false views, demonic phenomena, afflictions, passions, and every other type of constrained blindness to the whole.

The default assumption seems to be that for most of us, even an attempt at a severe self-conditioning to induce this beatific vision will probably succeed only haltingly and intermittently: we will really get stuck, and our pre- and anti-Tiantai habitual thinking patterns will usually be too powerful to allow us to really see anything of this vision as anything but a faraway pipe dream. Zhiyi's response is entirely consistent: well, so be it! This failure, this lack of enlightenment, this continual arising of unsatisfying partial experiences, even the suspicion that only failure is possible, is also part of the indivisible totality of all phenomena and is thus itself the whole of existence in its entirety too. This failure cannot be hindered or prevented by the intersubsumptive truth that has been glimpsed, because the whole cannot hinder the whole. Indulge it just as you would any other limiting or unsatisfying or evil thought, which is merely to say, any other conditional thought, because it is precisely that limitation, that conditionality, as provisional positing, that is its Emptiness and its omnipresence, its absoluteness, its inclusiveness of all existence, for its separation from them cannot be found. These benighted states are also upāyas that are directly identical to the Total Field of All Phenomena, inseparable from it, leading to it, and proceeding out of it for oneself and for all sentient beings.

Central to the methodology for approaching all of these less inspired states is the "awareness of attention" practice described earlier, which requires no ritual setting and can be applied in all times and places, no matter what the object of consciousness might be. It is as if Zhiyi first sets up the traditional ritual version of the practice and then implicitly concedes that after that version fails, we can strip-mine the essence of the practice and apply it in less demanding circumstances, offering literally hundreds of different ways to do so. It may well be that after enough ex-

perimenting, we can discover those ways that transform our experience permanently and radically; indeed, we find Zhiyi recommending that we adopt whatever method appeals to us most, the one we find most easily suited to our particular disposition, the one we discover we can "enter" the most effortlessly.

It still might seem to some people that the full, all-reversible, inter-subsumptive vision laid out in Tiantai theory is not only difficult but actually impossible for beings such as us to experience. It seems so far from common sense, and so far from everyday experience, which is so insistently and inertly nonreversible and non-intersubsumptive: the chair is a chair, the table is a table; I like what I like but dislike what I dislike; I am stuck being I, you are stuck being you; some are alive, some are dead; some are happy, some are sad; some times and places bloom with excitements and joys and insights, other times and places are inert and boring and depressing. This rainy day is inescapably rainy; sunny days are far away. That is what experience keeps telling us, and yet here are these Tiantai books denying and denying and denying it, throwing in our face some wild vision of total mutual intersubsumption and omnipresence of each in all and all in each. Why does this shameless discrepancy exist? Traditionalists will simply say that this is a question of progressive realization along the gradual path of spiritual growth; we're just not there yet, but the texts are giving us a faithful report from the field of the higher reaches of the practice, telling us what to expect and work toward. Cynics, on the other hand, will see this discrepancy as a ploy that has been deliberately built into the system for calculated and none too honorable or uplifting purposes.[10]

One of the most delicious joys of Tiantai thinking is to be able to accept either one of these views, including the most uncomprehending or unsympathetic suspicions about the remoteness of its vision, however supportable or unsupportable. To both the face-value believer and to the cynic it says, Why not? Remember the lost son counting his father's money in chapter 4 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, not knowing it was actually his own money? What he saw, considering it to be someone else's property, was actually his own property. Remember chapter 10 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, where the reader is suddenly informed that all the stories from earlier in the sūtra also apply to him or her? There too what we took to be "out

there," belonging to someone else, characterizing another, turned out to be part of ourselves, pertaining to ourselves. Remember early Buddhism, which claimed that all is suffering, even apparent happiness, because, to quote Montaigne, "the man who fears suffering is already suffering from what he fears"? The suffering seemed to be "out there," in another moment besides this one of happiness, but it turned out, again, that what this moment perceived as part of the rest of the world, as outside itself and off in other moments, was really an aspect of itself.

We can now see how Tiantai gives a theoretical basis for generalizing this principle: whatever you *see or think or feel, whatever you experience in any way*, is what you *are*. It does not matter in the slightest whether this seen other is "real" or "merely imagined," whether it's a historical figure or a fictional creation, whether it's a memory or just a daydream. In the present context these distinctions have no ultimate validity. Whatever you can think of as other than yourself, whatever you are not, whatever is excluded contrastively to you as part of the determination of you being what you are, whatever is in this minimal phenomenal sense "out there in your world," is "you." But it is you precisely in its contrast to you, as "outside," like the setup/punch-line structure of the joke.

These othernesses do not have to be melted into you nor you melted into them, so that there is no longer any distinction, for them to be you. The claim here is not that they are your "true self," nor that you are theirs, nor that there is some identical essence—a soul, an atman, a Buddha-nature—that lies hidden deep within you and deep within them, the "true self" of both. The surface forms themselves are true, and both of these opposed surfaces are equally true. They are you in the form of them. You are them in the form of you. The Buddha, real or imagined, that you wonder about, emulate, detest, aspire to, avoid? That's you. Buddhas of the past or future? They are you. Mass murderers? You. Murder victims? You. Idiots who block traffic? You. Road workers? You. The winner of the race, the king, the president, the valedictorian? You. Mozart, Beethoven, Johnny Rotten? You. The fool, the pervert, the mediocrity, the quietly desperate, the wrongheaded, the malicious, the devil? You, you, you, you, you. But the same applies to them—they are not just themselves, not just Buddhaish or demonic or perverse or presidential. *You* are also a fact in the world, you in your precise particularity right now are an element

they confront, avoid, hate, love, ignore in *their* world—you, Bill; you, Sally; you, Greg; you, Donna—so each of them is also Billful, Sallyish, Greggy, Donnaesque.

So go ahead wholeheartedly, Zhiyi might say: bewail the alleged fullness of the lived reality of Tiantai experience as something far-off, as dangled in front of you, as unrealizable in the present, as fable, as folly, as fiction. Precisely that *is* its presence in the present. Go ahead and conclude that it is all a mirage, a fantasy, a temporary stopgap, a gulp of saltwater. The point of Tiantai thinking, after all, is to make us reconsider our attachment to the conviction that mirage is *merely* mirage, that fantasy is *different from* reality, that the evaporating satisfaction of saltwater is *not real* satisfaction. These assumptions are precisely where the problem lies, where they have been shown, on their own premises, to be incoherent and self-contradictory. Tiantai can thus present itself indifferently either as fantasy or as truth, in either case premised on the performative insight into the non-difference of the two that is internal to the very act of its self-presentation, manifest in the actual act of thinking these thoughts, in whatever modality they appear. If Tiantai presents itself at a given time and place, in the consciousness of a particular sentient being, merely *as* fantasy, then it is a very special kind of fantasy: the fantasy experience of the non-difference between fantasy and reality, a thought-experiment about the non-difference between thought-experiment and fact. To truly experience this fantasy is to experience that non-difference. The Buddhahood and wisdom and joy you lack—they are all here in the form of, *as*, the specific lack of them that you are feeling right here, right now. That feeling of your lack of them is the way they are present, the form of their presence, that as which they are present.

There exists in our language a ready-made way to express this interpervasion of seemingly mutually exclusive properties: the *adverbial form*. This is a kind of grammatical loophole that allows for an intuitive manifestation of a co-presence of qualities X and Y, a co-presence otherwise excluded from the implicit ontology of our grammar. That co-presence of contrary qualities is what we experience when we say that X is present but is present *Y-ly*. X and Y, two completely different qualities, are nonetheless co-present here, so the event in question is everywhere X and yet Y, Y and yet X. This adverbial form applies most searchingly

here to opposite qualities, to the strange mode in which a specific *lack* is something felt positively. Those ecstasies you lack are possessed by you, but they are possessed *lackishly*. The absent is here: it is here *absently*. The distant future is here: it is here *distantly, futurely*. The distant past is here: it is here *distantly, pastly*. If it is impossible, that is the mode in which it is present and real: it is real and present *impossibly*. If it is fictional, that is the mode in which it is present and real: it is real and present *fictionally*. The impossible is an inseparable aspect of the possible; the fictional is an inalienable aspect of the real—contrasted to it, determinative of it, and thereby neither same nor different with it. That real or imagined other person, ceaselessly jazzed and rapturous in the cascade of the Total Field of All Phenomena as each moment of experience, is you—but he is you *otherly*.

And you, in your uninspired workaday life, flailing and straining to get even a small taste of something more, are that imagined other person, that unboundably intersubsuming Buddha, that indivisibly ecstatic mystical freak. You are that one who is constantly turning inside out and outside in as the incessant blossoming and re-blossoming of himself known and forgotten and known, that one who keeps becoming agonized bliss after blissed-out agony as universe after universe, that one who can't help imploding into totality after totality as self after other after self. You are that one and every other one. But you are them *youly*.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. So says Zhiyi, as recorded by Guanding, in his work *Guanyinxuanyi*, in *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* (大正新脩大藏經) [a standard collection of the East Asian Buddhist canon], edited by Takakusu Junjirō (高楠順次朗) and Watanabe Kaigyoku (渡邊海旭), et al., 100 vols. Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924–1932 (henceforth "T"), 34.882c–883a.

2. So says Zhiyi, as recorded by Guanding, in his work *Mohezhiguan*. See T46.54a.

3. See, for example, Zhanran's exposition of separation and non-obstruction in his work *Fahuawenjuji*, T34.247a–b, discussed in Brook Ziporyn, *Beyond Oneness and Difference: Li and Coherence in Chinese Buddhist Thought and Its Antecedents* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 242–255.

1. JUST HERE IS THE END OF SUFFERING

1. More specifically, *wisdom* is covered in the two steps of Right View and Right Intention; *discipline* is broken down into the three steps of Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood; and *meditation practice* is described in terms of the three steps of Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. These eight steps constitute the Eightfold Path, which is the content of the Fourth Noble Truth.

2. *Saccavibhanga Sutta*, "The Exposition of the Truths" (MN141), in *The Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya* (MN), translated by Nanamoli and Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 1099.

3. See "Mahānidāna Sutta," *Dīgha Nikāya* 15, for the locus classicus of this argument.

4. SN 22:59. Translation from *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Samyutta Nikaya* (SN), vol. 1, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 901–902.

2. RAFTS AND ARROWS

1. Cūlamālunkya Sutta, "The Shorter Discourse to Mālunkyāputta" (MN 63), in *The Middle-Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikaya*,

trans. Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 533–536.

2. Alagaddūpama Sutta, "The Simile of the Snake" (MN22), in *Middle-Length Discourses*, 228–229.

3. NEITHER THUS NOR OTHERWISE

1. Compare with Jan Westerhoff, *Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka: A Philosophical Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 36–38.
2. Compare with ibid., 91–124.
3. Compare with ibid., 183–98.

4. BUDDHA-NATURE AND ORIGINAL ENLIGHTENMENT

1. Thānissaro Bhikku (Geoffrey DeGraff), trans., *Udāna: Exclamations* (Barre, MA: Dhamma Dana Publication, 2012), 111–112.
2. Ibid., 36.
3. Ibid., 113–114 (*Udāna* 8:3–8:4).
4. T12.378a–c, and T12.617c–618b. For an English translation, see *The Nirvana Sūtra*, trans. Kosho Yamamoto, in *Buddha Nature Sūtras*, edited by Paul Reid (Seattle: Create Space, 2014), sections V124 ff., 65–68.
5. T46.452c.

5. HOW TO NOT KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING

1. T9.19b–c; my translation from Kumārajīva's *Lotus Sūtra* (*Miaofalianhuajing*). Compare Gene Reeves, *The Lotus Sūtra* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2007), 161–162, and Burton Watson, *The Lotus Sūtra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 99.
2. "The Glasses," *Seinfeld*, season 5, episode 3, Sony Television, September 30, 1993.
3. Jan Nattier, *A Few Good Men: The Bodhissatva Path According to "The Inquiry of Ugra"* (Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press, 2005).

6. THE NEW MIDDLE WAY

1. See Reeves, *Lotus Sūtra*, 55; Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 6.
2. See Reeves, *Lotus Sūtra*, 73; Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 16–17.
3. See Reeves, *Lotus Sūtra*, 75–76; Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 23–24.
4. My translation. Reeves (*Lotus Sūtra*, 76) reads: "Only among buddhas can the true character of all things be fathomed. This is because all existing things have such characteristics, such a nature, such an embodiment, such powers, such actions, such causes, such conditions, such effects, such rewards and retributions, and yet such a complete fundamental coherence." Watson (*Lotus Sūtra*, 24) reads: "The true entity of all phenomena can only be understood and shared between Buddhas. This reality consists of the appearance, nature, entity, power, influence, inherent cause, relation, latent effect, manifest effect, and their consistency from beginning to end."

5. We will focus on this Chinese version of Kumārajīva because it is the basis of Tiantai thought. Kumārajīva's version differs considerably from the extant Sanskrit texts. For this passage, for example, Kern's translation of the Sanskrit gives: "None but a Tathâgata, Sâriputra, can impart to a Tathâgata those laws which the Tathâgata knows. And all laws, Sâriputra, are taught by the Tathâgata, and by him alone; no one but he knows all laws, what they are, how they are, like what they are, of what characteristics and of what nature they are." Note that there is no "Buddha together with a Buddha" and that the ten factors have been reduced to five. Note also that they have none of the heavy philosophical flavor we find in the translations of Reeves and Watson, which follow the spin put on these lines in later traditions working with the implications of the more pregnant phraseology of the Chinese text.

6. Reeves has "among buddhas"; Watson has "between Buddhas."

7. See Reeves, *Lotus Sūtra*, 89; Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 36.

8. See Reeves, *Lotus Sūtra*, 90: "All things, originally and naturally, have the character of tranquil extinction." Compare with Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 37: "All phenomena from the very first have of themselves constantly borne the marks of tranquil extinction."

9. See Reeves, *Lotus Sūtra*, 83; Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 31.

10. See Reeves, *Lotus Sūtra*, 83; Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 31.

11. See Reeves, *Lotus Sūtra*, 114–115; Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 58.

12. Something like this actually happens in a story from the *Udāna*, an early Pali Buddhist text. The Buddha's cousin Nanda does not want to practice the holy life, for he has fallen in *lovā* with an incredibly sexy Sakyan girl. The Buddha says, "Okay, tell you what, if you practice the holy life for a while, I promise to give you 500 'dove-footed nymphs' to enjoy," and he gives Nanda a mystical vision of these lovely goddesses. Agreeing that they make the Sakyan girl look like a "cauterized monkey with its ears and nose cut off" in comparison, he agrees to practice meditation to get them. But when he does so, he finds that the joy of his meditation far exceeds the bliss of sexual pleasure and releases the Buddha from his promise. See *Udāna* 3.2., in Thānnisaro Bhikku, *Udāna: Exclamations*, 48–50.

13. See Reeves, *Lotus Sūtra*, 142: "Without even seeking it, we have acquired something great and good, an extremely rare treasure." Compare with Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 81: "We have gained great goodness and benefit, an immeasurably rare jewel, something unsought that came of itself."

14. See Reeves, *Lotus Sūtra*, 198–199; Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 135–136.

15. See Reeves, *Lotus Sūtra*, 227; Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 162.

16. See Reeves, *Lotus Sūtra*, 240; Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 175–176.

17. My translation. Compare with Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 225–226.

18. My translation. Compare with Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 226.

19. See Reeves, *Lotus Sūtra*, 294–295.

20. For an English translation, see John McCrae, trans., *The Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2004), 127–131.

21. See Reeves, *Lotus Sūtra*, 252–253; Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 188.

22. See Reeves, *Lotus Sūtra*, 338; Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 267.

7. THE INTERPERVASION OF ALL POINTS OF VIEW

1. For convenience, I will use the polemical term "Hīnayāna" in this book without the usual scare quotes, on the assumption that all readers understand it is a term used within the Mahāyāna and the *Lotus Sūtra* with polemical intent and is in no way a self-designation of the advocates of the teachings in question.

2. "Such people enjoy preaching the Dharma. And if anyone hears it, even for a moment, they attain supreme awakening" (Reeves, *Lotus Sūtra*, 227). T9.31a. The "it" here might refer to "the dharma preached by people who enjoy preaching it," or, more broadly, "the dharma" in itself. We will assume the first, narrower reading here for the sake of argument, but the second reading fits the claims made here even more snugly.

3. The sūtra is famously ambiguous about the relation between the Three Vehicles, to such a degree that this is a nodal point of Buddhist debate in medieval China: in the "Parable of the Burning House," in chapter 3 of the sūtra, are there actually three vehicles (śrāvaka, pratyekabuddha, and bodhisattva) or four (those three plus the *ekeyana*, the One Vehicle, the Buddha vehicle)? In other words, is the One Vehicle the same as the bodhisattva vehicle, or is it something else, above and beyond all three? For an overview of the issue, see Carl Bielfeldt, "Expedient Devices, the One Vehicle and the Lifespan of the Buddha," in Stephen Teiser and Jacqueline Stone, eds., *Readings of the Lotus Sūtra*, 62–82, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). The Tiantai interpretation takes on the ambiguity of the sūtra as something not only deliberate but also supremely skillful; it signifies that the bodhisattva vehicle can and must be seen in two different ways: as distinguished from the other two (hence as one of three) but also as inclusive of the other two (hence as a fourth). Note that if there is a fourth vehicle, there is really only one vehicle! The interpretative choice is not between three and four, but between three and four/one. It should be noted that on the Tiantai reading, even the fourth vehicle, the One Vehicle, is nothing other than the previous three seen as inclusive and interpenetrating, so even "four/one" is nothing other than "three," so we can still say there are only three. Hence there is in the end no way to be completely wrong about the number of vehicles: three is right, four is right, one is also right. Here we follow the traditional Tiantai reading.

4. T9.7b. My translation. Compare with Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 32.

5. T9.8a. My translation. Compare with Watson, 3 *Lotus Sūtra*, 5.

6. In Kumārajīva's version: *zhufacongbenlai changzijimiexiang* (諸法從本來 常自寂滅相).

7. 無量義者從一法生 其一法者即無相也. 如是無相 無相不相 不相無相名為實相. T9.385c.

8. T9.50a. My translation. Compare with Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 263.

9. T9.7c. Compare with Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 33.

10. See, for example, Watson, where the Buddha says, "Therefore the bodhisattvas pose as voice-hearers or pratyekabuddhas, employing countless expedient means to convert the different kinds of living beings. They proclaim themselves to be voice-hearers and say they are far removed from the Buddha way, and so bring emancipation to immeasurable multitudes, allowing them all to achieve success. Limited in aspiration, lazy and indolent though the multitudes are, bit by bit they are led to the attainment of

Buddhahood. Inwardly, in secret, the sons act as bodhisattvas, but outwardly they show themselves as voice-hearers. They seem to be lessening desires out of hatred for birth and death, but in truth they are purifying the Buddha lands. Before the multitude they seem possessed of the three poisons or manifest the signs of heretical views. My disciples in this manner use expedient means to save living beings" (*Lotus Sūtra*, 146–147).

11. T9.18c. Compare with Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 94–95.

12. *Jueliao shengwenfa shi zhujingzhiwang* (決了聲聞法 是諸經之王). Watson has: "But if they hear this profound sūtra which defines the Law of the voice-hearer, if they hear this king of the sūtras" (*Lotus Sūtra*, 167). Chinese grammar militates against allowing the reference of the subject of the sentence to leapfrog over the intervening phrase, so the full copula of the *shi* more naturally attaches itself to the preceding phrase.

8. TIANTAI

1. Having summarized the overall function of the Tiantai classificatory system, we need not go into its details here. Those who are interested in such details might consult my *Evil and/or/as the Good: Omnicentrism, Intersubjectivity, and Value Paradox in Tiantai Buddhist Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000) and *Being and Ambiguity: Philosophical Experiments with Tiantai Buddhism* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004).

2. X is, let's say, like a song. All non-X elements are aspects or moments of this song, which make it what it is: the rhythm, the melody, the arrangement, even the surrounding context, are present here as this "song." The "song" as such, as a totality, is present as a style of being in each of these elements, and there is no song outside of the elements; the style of being that is this tune is present only *as* these elements. A one-way relation between subsumer and subsumed does not apply here; each element is itself a center. It is as if we could further say that "the song itself" as well as the rhythm and the arrangement and the context are also present here as the melody.

3. Zhiyi, *Liumiaofamen*, T46.553a; italics added.

4. T46.174c.

5. Zhanran, *Zhiguan yili*, T46.451c.

6. Jorge Luis Borges, "The Theologians," translated by Andrew Hurley, in *Collected Fictions* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 201–207.

7. *Asuras* are the titans of Indic mythology, enemies of the gods (*devas*), incorporated into Buddhist mythology as exemplars of contentious pride, lust for power, and competitive ego.

9. EXPERIENCING TIANTAI

1. T46.54c: "You should realize that in the ultimate meaning, there is not even a single dharma, not to mention three thousand, while in conventional truth there are infinite dharmas, not to mention three thousand!"

2. In Chinese the ten suchnesses are: 十如是 : 如是相, 如是性, 如是體, 如是力, 如是作, 如是因, 如是緣, 如是果, 如是報, 如是本末究竟等. Literally this reads, "Just so appearance, just so nature, just so body, just so power, just so activity, just so

cause, just so conditions, just so effect, just so response, just so root-branch ultimacy and equality." See table 8.1 for a less literal translation. Also see Watson: "This reality consists of the appearance, nature, entity, power, influence, inherent cause, relation, latent effect, manifest effect, and their consistency from beginning to end" (*Lotus Sūtra*, 24). No exact equivalent is found in extant Sanskrit versions of the sūtra. Note that Tiantai famously reads all of these items in three ways, to correspond with the Three Truths, through an elaborate Chinese pun. In English it would be something like this: "Just so appearance, appearance just so, appearance so just; just so nature, nature just so, nature so just. . . ." "Just so appearance" indicates provisionality, the distinctions among things; "appearance just so" indicates Emptiness, where no one specific attribute can be named as definitive; "appearance so just" indicates the Middle—with "just" meaning both "no more than" and "perfect" and "so" meaning "being-so-ness." Both the differentiation and the ambiguity are no more than the other, and each in itself is the perfect ultimate absolute reality of the Total Field of All Appearances.

3. T9.49c–50a. See Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 261–262.

4. Zhiyi's famous words in the *Mohezhiguan* read as follows: "If there were no awareness at all, that would be the end of the matter; but if there is the slightest wisp of awareness, it immediately includes all Three Thousand aspects of reality. We don't want to say that the awareness is first and the Three Thousand come after, nor that the Three Thousand are first and the awareness comes after. Instead, it is like the way an object is changed by its own characteristics of arising, enduring, decaying, and perishing. If the thing existed prior to these characteristics, it would not be changed by them, and if the characteristics existed prior to the thing, it would also not be changed by them. Neither can be prior to the other; rather, it is just these changing characteristics that we are referring to when we say speak of 'the thing,' and just the thing that we are referring to when we speak of these 'changing characteristics.' Now, our awareness is the same way: if the mind produced all dharmas, that would be a vertical relation; if it contained all dharmas, that would be a horizontal relation. But in reality, neither the vertical nor the horizontal relation obtains, because it is just the awareness itself which is all dharmas, and it is just all dharmas themselves which are the awareness." 若無心而已. 介爾有心即具三千. 亦不言一心在前一切法在後. 亦不言一切法在前一心在後. 例如八相遷物. 物在相前物不被遷. 相在物前亦不被遷. 前亦不可後亦不可. 秖物論相遷秖相遷論物. 今心亦如是. 若從一心生一切法者. 此則是縱. 若心一時含一切法者. 此即是橫. 縱亦不可橫亦不可. 秖心是一切法. 一切法是心故. T46.54a.

5. See chapter 6, note 4 of the present text.

6. Literally, "When we understand it like this, we see that whenever sense organ and sense object come into contact, giving rise to a single moment of experience, the sense organ is a treasury of all [shall we say] 84,000 phenomena and the sense object is likewise a treasury of all 84,000 phenomena—and when that one moment of experience arises, it too is the treasury of all 84,000 phenomena. [For example,] the Dharmadhātu of Buddhahood faces the Dharmadhātu and thus gives rise to the Dharmadhātu, so all are alike aspects of Buddhahood." 若得此解. 根塵一念心起. 根即八萬四千法藏. 塵亦爾. 一念心起. 亦八萬四千法藏. 佛法界對法界起法界無非佛法. T46.9a. *Dharmadhātu* means something like "The Total Field of All Phenomena," so we could render this, "The Total Field of All Phenomena faces the Total Field of All Phenomena

and thus gives rise to the Total Field of All Phenomena." See also Zhanran's paraphrase and discussion, leaving out the "of Buddhahood," in *Zhiguanyili*, T46.541.b.

7. Zhanran, *Zhiguanyili*, T46.542a.

8. See George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1982), sections 14–15, 28, and, more expansively, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), 73–79.

9. In particular, these are space as the form of outer intuition (perception); time as the form of inner intuition; and the conceptual categories of unity, diversity, totality, reality, negation, limitation, substance-accident, cause-effect, communal reciprocity, possibility, existence, necessity; and the synthetic unity of apperception that, on one account, is active in and as all of these, as the unifying interconnectedness of diversity per se. Kant tries to show that these cannot be produced by experience, but are rather presupposed by it, providing the ground for all experience as well as for synthetic a priori judgments, and hence of all real knowledge, in the nature of experiencing consciousness itself. This is of course an oversimplification of the First Critique, and far from the whole story of Kant's account, which in my view takes interesting modifying turns in the Second and especially the Third Critique. We may note in passing that we come closer to the Tiantai view when, like Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, we take the hint of the Second and Third Critiques and subject the distinction between experience and alleged non-experience to question, extending the critique of causality and necessity to include those Kant attributes to our a priori faculties themselves, leveling the playing field: as against Kant's division of the subjective and the objective, cause and necessity from non-cause and non-necessity, we find both on either side of the putative divide. The thing in itself cannot "cause" anything and cannot be "outside" our experience, because "cause" and "outsideness" are a priori forms of our understanding and intuition, respectively. Separateness itself is as merely phenomenal as unity, including the separateness Kant claims to exist between phenomena and noumena. Separateness between the two realms can be no more real than any other separateness and no more real than the unities produced by our understanding. The same goes for necessity and freedom. The same necessity and universality thus apply to both the separateness and the unity, without exception.

10. The Buddha's words before revealing his lifespan are: "I, the Tathāgata, know and see the triple world as it really is: without birth or death though as if receding and emerging, and without anyone either in the world or extinguished from it through Nirvana, neither real nor false, neither such nor otherwise—unlike the way the triple world sees itself!" My translation, from Kumārajīva's Chinese version of the *Lotus Sūtra* at T9.42c.

11. What humans desire can be described as increasing degrees of control, freedom, unconditionality, or, in Nietzsche's word, power. But this is tautological; it means, "I want to be able to ensure that what I want to be the case will be the case." This means to be the sole cause of certain effects. In addition to being tautological, it also involves a self-contradictory paradox, because it means that any finite condition, even "being powerful," will not be a good in itself, but only a good to the extent that I happen to want it, and that attaining it (or really, re-attaining it, since to want a particular object I must first have some conception of what it is, drawn from previous experience; this means

I must have the power to maintain myself as a desirer across time) demonstrates my power to attain it. The power to attain the object whenever I want it, not the object itself, is what is wanted, even if it is "power" that is objectified as the desideratum (and also to get rid of it when I don't want it—a good thing ceases to be good if it sticks to me when I don't want it, like the inescapable gold of King Midas); this means that to be *able* to be either powerful or not powerful is actually more powerful than being "stuck" in the position of only being able to be powerful.

12. "Desire is a defiling disturbance, and thus we speak of getting free of it. But desire is also a dharma-gate, so we speak of dwelling within it. To get free of it is precisely to dwell within it; one completely frees oneself from it and also completely dwells within it. The more deeply free of it we get, the more deeply we dwell within it. The most complete freedom from it is also the most complete dwelling within it." T34.946a.

13. A perception is thus viewed as the function of a capability. This capability is inherently entailed in the subject—and in all loci of time and space. That is, to see a car is to manifest an ineradicable capability to discern something as cars, and to discern this very car in this very way. This concept also applies to memories and imaginings; the recollection of an image is a capability, not the retrieval of a virtual object stored in the mind. Indeed, to perceive X is to have the capability, by means of habits of framing and focusing, to see the all as X; to visualize or remember X is exactly the same thing: to have the capability to see the all as X. One is actually *seeing* in both cases, but in the locally coherent/globally incoherent form of as-ness—arranging the elements before one (always everything) into a particular gestalt.

14. See, for example, the "Lotus Samadhi Repentance," a key component of Zhiyi's own practice, invoked as one of the main available meditation programs in *Mohezhiguan*, T46.13a, and given a full exposition of its ritual procedure in a separate text devoted exclusively to it, the *Fahuasanmei chanyi* (法華三昧懺儀), collected at T46.949a–959c. The word "repentance" should not confuse us with unreflective convenient parallelisms of the kind that tempt comparative historians of religion; the justification, aim, and procedure of the process is almost perfectly opposed to what a repentance of sin would denote in a theistic context. Note in particular that the focus of the ritual confession is on the universality and inescapability of delusion, finitude, and transgression; one repents not one's own misdeeds at a particular time, but the deluded self-frustrating misdeeds of all the six sense organs (including the mind), of *all sentient beings*, of not just the past and present, but even of the future. It is presupposed that *one will keep committing these misdeeds and delusions forever!* The misfunctions of the six sense organs are repented, moreover, not because they are disobedient to any command, from the Buddha or a God or a parent or anyone else, but explicitly because they limit the capabilities of the six sense organs themselves. Because of their deluded attachments, they fail to see, hear, taste, smell, feel, or think the glorious perfection that is always right in front of them. By habitual biased attachments they blot out their own access to the intersubsumptive Total Field of All Phenomena and cannot see that all phenomena are aspects of Buddhahood already, including their own misdeeds themselves! The emphatic insistence on this disparity of content and purpose, however, should not be taken to deny that the impulse to confess itself is a shared and perhaps deeply rooted human drive, one that has a causative role in phenomena as disparate as Tiantai repentance ritual, Roman Catholic confession,

ritual bonding, truth-or-dare games, friendship, fraternity hazing, and psychoanalysis. The point is that this same factor is radically repurposed depending on the conceptual context into which it is put and what other partial causes it joins to produce a given effect: it shares the incapacity for singlehanded causality and the resulting constitutive ambiguity that we have argued to be endemic to all finite realities.

15. T46.14c.

16. Huisi, *Suiziyisanmei* (X55.497b), in Xuzangjing. 續藏經 [Extended Collection of the East Asian Buddhist Canon]. 新文豐影印本. Xinwenfeng reprint. Taipei: Xinwenfeng, n.d. (Hereafter cited as "X.")

17. Zhiyi, via Guanding, *Mohezhiguan*, T46.14c.

18. Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, Ip18, in *Ethics and Selected Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1982), 46.

19. Zhiyi proposes an intriguing metaphor for this situation:

> [Although no description of how experience can happen is literally true, since we have shown causality from self, other, both, and neither all to be incoherent,] if we follow the most convenient description, we should say [employing the "both" model of causality,] that Ignorance [our biased cognitive attachments] shapes the dharma-nature [the intersubsuming unconditional reality of the Total Field of All Phenomena], thereby producing all the phenomena as we experience them, just as all the events in a dream arise when the phenomenon of sleep shapes the mind. Mind and objective conditions combine, and then all the three thousand natures and appearances of the three types of world arise from the mind. The one (dharma-)nature [i.e., the ambiguous intersubsumption of unconditionality, here compared to the sleeper's full consciousness always present and operative though hidden during the dream] is scant but not definitively absent, and events of Ignorance [our experienced world of diverse mutually exclusive objects, here compared to the sleep and its dream events] are multitudinous but not definitively present. When the "many" we are pointing to is also the one, this many is not exclusively many. And when the "one" we are pointing to is also the many, the one is not. Hence we call this mind the inconceivable object of contemplation. If you can comprehend that any single instant of mentation [which we already showed to be empty and non-arising, both diachronically and synchronically; see note 4 above] nonetheless [produces, entails] is itself all this multitude as mental events, then you know that all of these many mental events are the one [empty] moment of mentation, and so [the mind, though one, is] not one and [the many phenomena, though many, are] not many. And thus also that as soon as there is any one element of existence, all things are expressions of that element of existence as well, that all of those things expressing that element are no more than that one element, that the one is not one and the many are not many.

Zhiyi then goes on to apply the same to each and any of the diverse, produced, sustained, static phenomena originally present in the field of awareness not as producer, but as produced, not as subject, but as object—any aggregate of existence, and experienced characteristic. Each is now also equally in the role of the producing, sustaining oneness that manifests as all other things, and that all other things reduce to, as active, unifying,

perceiving subject so that they are neither many nor one. Hence the styles of each one intersubsumes with the style of all the others. Each is both pervader and pervaded, subsumer and subsumed.

Zhiyi, via Guanding, in *Mohezhiguan*, T46.55a–b: 若隨便宜者應言無明法法性生一切法. 如眠法法心則有一切夢事. 心與緣合則三種世間三千相性皆從心起. 一性雖少而不無, 無明雖多而不有. 何者. 指一為多多非多, 指多為一一非少. 故名此心為不思議境也. 若解一心一切心, 一切心一心, 非一非一切. The "one mind" has already been shown to be "empty," via the analysis of the "four phases," in the immediately preceding passage: 當知四句求心不可得, 求三千法亦不可得. 既橫從四句生三千法不可得者, 應從一念心滅生三千法耶心滅尚不能生一法, 云何能生三千法耶. 若從心亦滅亦不滅生三千法者, 亦滅亦不滅其性相違, 猶如水火二俱不立, 云何能生三千法耶. 若謂心非滅非不滅生三千法者, 非滅非不滅非能非所, 云何能所生三千法耶. 亦縱亦橫求三千法不可得, 非縱非橫求三千法亦不可得. 言語道斷心行處滅, 故名不可思議境. The mind, as producer of all events, has been seen not to arise from itself, from others (i.e., from the events), from both, or from neither. It does not arise at all. This also means it is not a determinate entity at all (for the same applies to the boundaries in space [inside/outside] as to the boundaries in time [before/after]). It is not "something," an entity that can exclude other entities. It is, therefore, "empty."

Now, this empty mind, which is not anything in particular, is seen to produce (造), entail (具), and ultimately be identical to (即) all phenomena. In the language of the *Jueyisanmei*, this is 即意之實際—"the ultimate reality which is identical to (deluded, intentional) mentation," which is also the Buddha-nature, which is also all phenomena. This is the connection between "one" and "Emptiness." The "one" refers to the object already analyzed and seen to be empty. In other words, the "one mind" here, though initially a conventional or provisionally posited determinate entity, is here adduced as something already seen to be empty. Hence the first line is about the transition from Emptiness to conventional, the second from conventional to empty, and the third is about the Center. "All states of mind" includes the initial one as provisional posits, as conventional: all are found to be identical to its already established Emptiness.

We could rewrite this for clarity: 一念一切法, 一切法一念, 非一非一切 非念非法 非心非色 亦念亦法 亦心亦色. That is, "One moment of experience is what produces, entails, and actually just *is* all phenomena, and all of these diverse phenomena are that one moment of experience, so the one moment is not one moment, and many phenomena are not many, neither of the two is merely experience or merely phenomena, neither of the two is merely mind or matter, and yet both are both experience and phenomena, both mind and matter." OR : 一念無念一切法, 一切法 一念無念, 非一非無非一切 亦一亦無亦一切法. "One moment of experience is no moment of experience, and it is this that produces, entails, and simply *is* all phenomena, and all phenomena are no-thought-one-thought, so none are merely one, or none, nor many, and each is one, each is none, each is all phenomena." Hence the passage goes on to apply the same formula to each of the diverse "produced" contents of the mind: one aggregate manifests as all things, all things are that aggregate, so the one is not one and the many are not many; one characteristic makes everything a manifestation of that characteristic, making that original characteristic empty, but this totality of other things is now seen to be this empty characteristic, and thus again the one is not one and the many are not many.

20. Zhiyi, in his *Sinianchu*, T46.578c, says: "Speaking in terms of the Perfect Teaching, we can also say that there is only physical form, only sound, only scent, only flavor, only touch, only consciousness." 若圓說者, 亦得唯色唯聲唯香唯味唯觸唯識.

21. T37.206a: "唯愛唯見唯色唯香."

22. T37.201b: "唯生唯住唯異唯滅."

23. See Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 38–39.

24. See chapters 2, 3, and 4 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, and passim.

25. See Watson, *Lotus Sūtra*, 135–142.

26. Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, vols. 2, 3, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993), 205–211.

10. TIANTAI ETHICS AND THE WORST-CASE SCENARIO

1. Much of what I say in this chapter is derived from a conversation with David Loy, who raised this question about Tiantai ethics in a review of my book *Evil and/or/as the Good*. See David R. Loy, review of *Evil and/or/as the Good: Omnicentrism, Intersubjectivity, and Value Paradox in Tiantai Buddhist Thought*, *Philosophy East and West* 54, no. 1 (2004): 99–103; Ziporyn, "Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Tiantai Doctrine of Evil as the Good: A Response to David R. Loy," *Philosophy East and West* 55, no. 2 (2005): 329–347; and Loy, "Evil as the Good? A Reply to Brook Ziporyn," *Philosophy East and West* 55, no. 2 (2005): 348–352 (used by permission).

2. Zhanran, *Zhiguan yili*, T46.451c.

3. *Mencius*, IB3 and IB5. For an English translation, see D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), 17–22. Confucius is depicted as using a similar technique when trying to transform Robber Zhi in the *Zhuangzi* chapter of the same name (comically and unsuccessfully, of course), telling the robber that his unique combination of the three great virtues of man—physical excellence, wisdom, and courage—make him uniquely worthy to be a legitimate ruler rather than a lowly bandit. The implication is that these are the very traits that have enabled him to become a great robber. Confucius tries to make "going straight" attractive as an alternative, appealing to the same desires (for wealth, power, glory) that currently drive Zhi to be a bandit, though with the added benefit of social respectability. Confucius even offers to act as a mediator to set the robber up as a feudal lord, persuading all the great states of the day to cede territory to him and making him ruler over a great city, thereby proposing what he sees as a win-win situation: the robber gets what he has always wanted, and more, and the world is spared his pillaging and violence (sacrificing, perhaps, the relatively small population who would then have to live under his rule in the proposed enfeoffment). In the *Zhuangzi* story the robber rejects the hypocrisy of the offer quite acerbically, and the point of the chapter is its indefensibility. But it is still striking that the model of a moralizing meddler in the story is not a fiery denouncing prophet who condemns the propensities of the sinner, but a flattering negotiator who takes it for granted that no one can be asked to give up what he wants unless it is to gain something else that he wants, or more of what he wants: the only possible basis for containment and defanging of evil is assumed to lie within the evil itself. For an English translation, see Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 252–265.

The older James Legge translation can be found online at the Chinese Text Project, http://ctext.org/zhuangzi/robber-zhi.

4. Zhili, *Simingzunzhe jiaoxinglu*, T46.900b.

EPILOGUE

1. *Dharmadhātu* (*fajie* 法界). This means both the entirety of all experience of all beings and the ultimate reality, suggesting both the whole (all phenomena) and the Absolute (what is unchanging and serves as the ground of all reality and its ultimate truth). These two are seen here as one and the same: the whole is the ground, the ground is the whole. The term "field," besides rendering the Chinese rather literally, is meant to suggest this ambiguity: both the totality of the contents of the field and the field itself as that within which all the contents are found.

2. According to the meaning of their standard Chinese renderings, the ten epithets are Tathāgata ("thus come one"), Worthy of Offerings (also a name for arhats in general), Untilting Omnipresent Knowledge, Accomplished in Illumination and Action, Well-Departed, Untangler of the Worlds, Master Tamer, Teacher of Gods and Humans, Awakened One, and Honored of the World.

3. *Fajieyin* (法界印). Literally, "seal of the Dharmadhātu." In Sanskrit this would be *dharmadhātu-uddāna*. A "seal" is sometimes used in Buddhist contexts to mean a characteristic mark, as in the "Three Seals of the Dharma" (nonself, impermanence, and suffering, for example), that guarantees the authenticity of a purported teaching—so something like a "seal of authenticity." It is also used in the sense of a protective seal, or a seal stamped by an authority that guarantees the protection of that authority—something like a passport, or a guarantee that something is an authentic representative of some power and thus not to be interfered with without that power getting involved. Hence the term comes to mean something like a protective spell in popular discourse. This meaning is evidently in play in the reference to indestructibility. The idea here is that karma and demons are both genuine, inalienable manifestations of the Total Field of All Phenomena and are indestructible, although for a different reason: because each is the whole, and the whole cannot destroy the whole.

4. Zhiyi, via Guanding, *Mohezhiguan*, T46.11b–12a.

5. To say that things are "divine" might mean many things. For example, it might mean that they are ordained by the highest authority to be definitely what they are and not otherwise, that they are willfully created to fulfill a specific function by a perfect consciousness with perfect abilities, in some way fulfilling the plan or design of the divine mind; or it might mean they are reducible to an original unity that is wholly other to the diversity normally experienced by the deluded mind and senses.

6. These claims seem to have something to do with having a higher origin, where "higher" presupposes a real ontological and epistemological hierarchy: some entities are more real, more substantial, more valuable, and more powerful than others.

7. A survey of world religions and mystical philosophies would reveal a wide variety of doctrines asserting some kind of immanence or omnipresence of (some version of) oneness in the many, some way of gathering the experienced diversity of the world into some single entity claimed to be holy or divine or ultimate, or else indicating the

presence of this holiness inside the various things we experience. These claims seem to bear at least a superficial resemblance to the Tiantai assertion that "all phenomena are Buddhahood." For example, we might think of the claim that God is everywhere, or that all things are "in" God, or that even that in some sense all things "are" God, or that all people are parts of the divine, or that the spirit is everywhere, that Thou art That, that ātman is Brahman, and so on.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting in passing how much the psychological and social implications of these doctrines differ in relation to two parameters that differ radically in all of these claims. The first question we must ask is, *What* is immanent? What is this something that is being said to be pervading or present in all things? What is the nature of the alleged oneness or holiness, what is its structure and content? For all of these terms entail very different ideas with very different structural implications: in terms of their exact meanings, "God" is not the same as "the One" is not the same as "Buddhahood" is not the same as "Mind" is not the same as "Being," and each of these terms implies a different kind of relation to diversity and otherness (creator/created, or knower/known, or source/emanation, or universal/instantiation, or raw material/finished form, and so on). The second question to ask is the *extent* of the alleged immanent pervasion. There seem to be wildly different consequences depending on whether the claim that something is "everywhere" ends up meaning thoroughgoing omnipresence or merely pseudo-omnipresence in some limited sense. The latter ends up, on examination, to amount to no more than the co-presence of some allegedly holy entity within some specified limited range of existence, possessed by one subset of beings but not the rest, and thus ends up being a reinforcement for the bias of one group or aspect of existence over others—thus the exact opposite of the consequence of a true omnipresence.

The presence of the divine oneness is found, on examination, to be limited to some particular aspect of all beings rather than all aspects (e.g., just their form and not their matter), or to some small subset of beings rather than all beings (sentient but not insentient beings, or only humans but not other animals), or to some even smaller subset of human beings rather than all human beings (usually members of a particular community or professor of certain beliefs or enactors of certain rituals, the religious in-group), or to some parts of the members of that subgroup of humans rather than the whole of even each of those persons (usually their mental and spiritual aspects rather than their bodies, or else some subset of their mental aspects like reason or obedience or faith or goodness as opposed to their passions and self-will and malice and disobedience).

Alertness to this question of extent of the proposed oneness or divinity can fend off serious misunderstandings. For example, we might consider the doctrine of the "body of Christ" in some of the epistles of St. Paul in this perspective: we can perhaps identify a highly diluted version of quasi-pantheistic sentiment there, suggesting that all believers make up the very body of Christ, all members of one body. Each of these believers shares in the activity of the divine figure: each is to suffer and die (i.e., die to sin, die to the flesh) in his or her soul, participating thereby in the Passion of the Christ and expecting to be resurrected in glory with him. In some sense, this is saying all the believers are themselves the very body of Christ himself, that we comprise God, which sounds like a relation of immanence, a union of God and man. However, it turns out we are only "parts" of the "body" of Christ (rather than the entirety of that body, or the head of this

body, which is Christ himself), very much subordinated to the head, with a structural premise that the body of any creature is a non-detachable *tool* to be used by the head, which it must obey.

That is a limitation of omnipresence due to the nature of what is alleged to be omnipresent, which produces a certain metaphorical structure of subordination and obedience in spite of the alleged co-presence. But the limitation due to extent is even more glaring: nonbelievers and all nonhuman creatures are excluded from participation in this divine body. Furthermore, even for those who are believers fully recognized as "members" of the body of Christ, it is only a certain aspect of their selves that really participates in this immanent pervading divinity—that is, only one's own Christified spirit, that aspect of oneself that participates in a microcosmic reenactment of the redemption drama. This relegates one aspect of oneself (sin, fleshly passions, willfulness, self-interest, disobedience) to constant crucifixion and sacrifice so as to glorify and resurrect the other aspect, the divine aspect. The pain of self-sacrifice, and the rebound resurrection in the spirit therefrom, are participants in the divine, but all other aspects of experience, including all the experience of all nonbelievers and the being of all nonhuman animals and things, and all the flesh and all the sinful passions even of the believers, are excluded from this identity with the divine.

If we are mystically inclined, we may feel that a bit of a bait and switch has occurred here: we see how the appeal of real union with the divine is dangled before us but then snatched away: the apparent non-duality between creator and created, and between insider and outsider (between God and man and between Jew and Greek, as it were), this apparent immanence and non-dualism, is actually merely a means to the exact opposite effect: oneness is used to achieve division, participation is used to produce subordination. The result of this apparent inclusiveness and universalism, redolent of anti-dualist rhetoric, turns out not to be the undermining of dualism and exclusivism, but a radical exacerbation of it, the absolute and ontologically unbridgeable dualism between spirit and matter, between piety and impiety, and between believers and nonbelievers. This use of the trope of *oneness as a means to achieve division* is perhaps distinctive to monotheism in general, from which it has now spread to many other dimensions of culture and theory (see note 9, below). Alertness to these factors helps us see what matters most when considering doctrines of immanence of the "the divine" or "the ultimate" or "the absolute": both what specific content is given to this principle and how limited it turns out to be—in other words, how closely it approaches real exceptionless omnipresence.

8. Bertrand Russell, "Mysticism," *Religion and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), 188.

9. Zhiyi, *Mohezhiguan*, T 9.12c.

10. In defense of the cynic, there is much to be said for fostering a certain wariness and circumspection whenever something unverified and fabulous is offered to one; simple street smarts would counsel that one be cautious and suspicious about anything that sounds a bit too good to be true: chances are it is, or that something as yet unmentioned is wanted in return. But in cases where such suspicions are held in particular about non-monotheist religious ideas by those whose habitual forms of thinking about culture have been forged in any traditions of thought derived from monotheism *or from resistance to monotheism*—arguably, therefore, almost all modern theory—one cannot help wonder-

ing if this is not a misapplication of categories from across radically divergent cultural spheres, a kind of unthinking Pavlovian response to certain superficial similarities that serve as triggers for deeply ingrained prejudices.

It is worth reflecting on the premises behind these reactions of mistrust, because they seem to involve a mutually reinforcing confluence of two originally opposed tendencies: not merely habitual monotheist anathematization of pagan ideas of immanence, but also, conversely, understandable post-monotheist distrust of religious thinking in general, originally aimed at monotheism itself. For it would be reasonable to expect a once-bitten twice-shy reaction to religious ideas of oneness or allness or omnipresence in those who have been saturated in cultural spheres that were historically formed under the auspices of monotheism—which is distinctive for its peculiar construction of oneness as an exclusivist rather than an inclusivist trope, oneness used as a tool to generate division, which is quite plausibly identifiable as the very structure that makes monotheism monotheism. This structure is arguably not often actually found, or even intelligible, in cultures outside the monotheist sphere of influence, but it tends to be assumed and hence read into other cultural spheres by the monotheist or anti-monotheist mind-set.

Indeed, it might well be argued that long immersion and overfamiliarity with monotheist cultural spheres and their aftermath often numbs us to what observers unsympathetic to monotheism might well describe as the traumatic effects of the outrageous ordeal of being bombarded from youth by the all-or-nothing ultimatums and the hyperfraught head games by means of which historical authenticity and ideological authority are contested and established in monotheist traditions: their construction of culture as war zone, their mechanisms of exclusivity, their parade of rationally repellent and scandalously improbable claims with hair-raising threats attached to them, their valorization of obedience and inescapable surveillance, their subordination of all aspects of existence to the single-mindedness of conscious control, their requirement for war-against-self as the essence of ethics, and their blandly ruthless deployment of out-group demonization as a means to in-group solidarity. Those who have lived under such spiritual combat conditions may easily assume that there have never been any alternatives anywhere on earth: this is just what "religions" are, or what mythological structures do, or what any notion of unity with a symbol of eternity or omnipresence is all about, what all cultural narratives of tradition and self-reflection and affiliation necessarily amount to, they assume: they are war machines for mind invasion and demonization to maximize the desperation for inclusion, what else?

Indeed, pretty much all prevalent modern theories of culture have been built from and against a horizon composed entirely of these systems of belief that are, in a world perspective, very exceptional and extreme forms of what outsiders might understandably see as outrageous spiritual violence and blackmail. Even our secular theories about and against religion are designed in response to monotheism and are saturated with its assumptions. The structures peculiar to these particular religious systems and their cultural aftermaths —everywhere obsessed with matters of allegiance, identity formation, domination, control—can thereby misleadingly appear to be the default settings of all culture as such and inform almost all modern theoretical attempts to understand all cultural phenomena anywhere in the world, even outside the spheres where these religions dominated. The need for alternate paradigms is never more evident than in the resulting disconnect.

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BROOK A. ZIPORYN was born and partly raised in the United States. His time has been divided between his native country, Taiwan, China, and Singapore. In all of these places he has studied topics in Chinese and Buddhist thought and in comparative philosophy. He has been teaching these same topics to university and graduate students for about twenty years, beginning in 1996, when he earned his PhD in the same from the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Currently he is Professor of Chinese Religion, Philosophy, and Comparative Thought at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. He's mental for unexpected chord progressions, counterintuitive philosophical ideas, and at least one other thing.